

Gladys Mitchell

LOVERS, Make Moan



Lovers, Make Moan

Gladys Mitchell

Bradley 60

A 3S digital back-up edition 1.0
[click for scan notes and proofing history](#)

Contents

[CHAPTER 1: WINDFALL](#)
[CHAPTER 2: READ-THROUGH](#)
[CHAPTER 3: MOUTHS OF BABES](#)
[CHAPTER 4: RETRACTABLE BLADE](#)
[CHAPTER 5: ALL RIGHT ON THE NIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER 6: LAST PERFORMANCE](#)
[CHAPTER 7: BARE BODKIN](#)
[CHAPTER 8: SPECULATIONS](#)
[CHAPTER 9: CORONER'S COURT](#)
[CHAPTER 10: FURTHER SUGGESTIONS](#)
[CHAPTER 11: MYTILUS EDULIS HAS ORANGE GILLS](#)
[CHAPTER 12: SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF A PSYCHIATRIST](#)
[CHAPTER 13: CUT DOWN TO SIZE](#)
[CHAPTER 14: BODY ON THE FORESHORE](#)
[CHAPTER 15: IDENTIFICATION OF A DEAD BOY](#)
[CHAPTER 16: PARADE OF SUSPECTS](#)
[CHAPTER 17: MUTE AND OTHER WITNESSES](#)
[CHAPTER 18: THRENODY](#)

Also by Gladys Mitchell

SPEEDY DEATH
MYSTERY OF A BUTCHER'S SHOP
THE LONGER BODIES
THE SALTMARSH MURDERS
DEATH AT THE OPERA
THE DEVIL AT SAXON WALL
DEAD MAN 'S MORRIS
COME AWAY DEATH
ST. PETER'S FINGER
PRINTER'S ERROR
BRAZEN TONGUE
HANGMAN'S CURFEW
WHEN LAST I DIED
LAURELS ARE POISON
THE WORSTED VIPER
SUNSET OVER SOHO
MY FATHER SLEEPS
THE RISING OF THE MOON
HERE COMES A CHOPPER
DEATH AND THE MAIDEN
THE DANCING DRUIDS
TOM BROWN'S BODY
GROANING SPINNEY
THE DEVIL 'S ELBOW
THE ECHOING STRANGERS
MERLIN'S FURLONG
FAINTLEY SPEAKING
WATSON'S CHOICE
TWELVE HORSES AND THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE
THE TWENTY-THIRD MAN
SPOTTED HEMLOCK
THE MAN WHO GREW TOMATOES
SAY IT WITH FLOWERS
THE NODDING CANARIES
MY BONES WILL KEEP
ADDERS ON THE HEATH
DEATH OF A DELFT BLUE
PAGEANT OF MURDER
THE CROAKING RAVEN
SKELETON ISLAND
THREE QUICK AND FIVE DEAD
DANCE TO YOUR DADDY
GORY DEW
LAMENT FOR LETO
A HEARSE ON MAY DAY

THE MURDER OF BUSY LIZZIE
A JAVELIN FOR JONAH
WINKING AT THE BRIM
CONVENT ON STYX
LATE, LATE IN THE EVENING
NOONDAY AND NIGHT
FAULT IN THE STRUCTURE
WRAITHS AND CHANGELINGS
MINGLED WITH VENOM
NEST OF VIPERS
MUDFLATS OF THE DEAD
UNCOFFIN'D CLAY
THE WHISPERING KNIGHTS
THE DEATH-CAP DANCERS

First published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph Ltd
44 Bedford Square, London WC1 — 1981

© 1981 by Gladys Mitchell

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Copyright owner

ISBN 0 7181 2031 0

Printed and bound by Redwood Burn Ltd, Trowbridge and Esher.

This book is an unashamed, unrepentant, middle-of-the-road whodunnit which keeps the rules of that classic literary form by providing all the clues to the murderer for those readers who can be bothered to pick them up, as Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley is compelled to do in order to solve the mystery.

One or two red herrings are thrown in to add piquancy to the narrative but the author, as in honour bound, eschews mysterious Chinamen, secret passages and poisons unknown to science. However, she has broken her oath by stealing part of the plot from another writer, for the story revolves around an amateur dramatic society's performances of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Pyramus kills himself.

Some readers may think they recognise the setting of the book as the port of Poole in Dorset. In that case, the grounds in which the open-air production is staged must be in or near the famous gardens of Compton Acres. Castle Island, however, is entirely fictitious, and so are any references to the tides in Poole Harbour.

To JULIAN with love

Time was, when we, beside a Highland burn,
Gathered bell heather and the fronds of fern,
Or squelched in mud and wet-through to the skin,
To watch for salmon leaping up the linn,
Or saw the summer snow on high Ben More,
And gathered pebbles by Loch Broom's grey shore.

G. M. September 1977

Chapter 1

Windfall

“I’ll put a girdle round about the earth.”



The town was tripartite. Behind the quay with its Customs House, its ancient, partially restored inn, its eighteenth-century town hall, the old warehouses and the low-ceilinged shops which sold chandlers’ wares, yachting gear and marine stores of all kinds, lay the original guildhall, dating from the fourteenth century.

In the old town, a house, long due for preservation, incorporated some twelfth-century features in what had been a Tudor mansion and, behind and around all this, there was a strange, heterogeneous jumble of narrow alleys, public houses, shops old and new, and what had been the delightful dwellings of the eighteenth-century merchants, now either let out in flats or with their ground-floors converted into modern shop-fronts.

The ancient high street which led, with a dog’s-leg turn, down to the quay, had been made a traffic-free shopping precinct, but north of it were the supermarkets, the gas and electricity showrooms, the new public baths, the multi-storey car park, the new library and art gallery and a complex of even more recent buildings which included a theatre, a concert hall, a restaurant and rooms which could be hired for various public functions. Behind a beautifully maintained public park flanked by a shallow lake cut off from the vast harbour (almost an inland sea) by the railway embankment, lay the third part of the town. This was largely residential, but only to those who could afford to live there. Part of it faced the open bay, shallow and islanded, which disclosed large, shining sandbanks at low tide. To the east, west and north of it rose low hills on which the most desirable houses were built. They all faced the bay, a beautiful, natural harbour for small yachts. On the further shore, as the land curved round, there was a long ridge of higher hills and beyond these again were chalk cliffs and the open waters of the English Channel.

The setting, in fact, was picturesque, interesting and reasonably secluded,

and Simon and Penelope congratulated themselves upon having acquired their property (on the strength of a legacy) before house prices soared beyond the reach of anybody who was not in the millionaire bracket, although maintenance was always a problem regarding both house and garden.

However, one fine morning of a biting January day, the unexpected cheque from CABO (Come and Buy One) fell like a ripe plum through the letter-box and was brought to the breakfast table by Carrie, the only indoor servant except for the cook, whom the Bradleys could afford to keep.

Simon opened the envelope and gave what the romantic novelists used to call 'a choking cry'.

"Has the bank gone bust?" his wife Penelope anxiously enquired.

"Not so, but far otherwise." He handed her the contents of the envelope, whereupon she exclaimed, almost in disbelief, "Good Lord! Pennies from heaven!"

"Yes, indeed," agreed Simon. "Noice little cheque, Liza. Wot shall us do wiv it?"

"I thought that was a joke about the fitted bath in a council house," said Penelope, who, although beautiful and in her own sphere intelligent, had a painfully pedestrian mind. "Didn't they keep the coal in it, or something?"

"Probably. I meant what shall we do with all this lovely lolly?"

"Couldn't you take the Sabbatical that's due to you?"

"And do what with it?"

"Go for a world cruise, of course."

"What about Rosamund and Edmund? A world cruise would be murder with two kids aged six and three and a half."

"Oh, there will be playrooms and provision for being sea-sick and a doctor on board and a ship's hospital."

"What visions you conjure up!"

"Well, what about parking the children on to relatives? People would be glad to have them, I'm sure."

"For three or four months?"

"The aunts and uncles adore them."

"They would need to."

"Well, at least we could put out a feeler or two. I've always wanted to go round the world on an ocean liner. It would be a kind of holiday for the relatives as well. We could offer them this house while we are away, and then the children wouldn't miss going to the beach. The relatives surely would jump at free

lodgings at the seaside in the summer. Anybody would.”

“Are we talking about your relatives or mine?”

“Well,” said Penelope, helping herself to butter and avoiding her husband’s eye, “I was rather thinking of yours. You’re so much cleverer at talking people into things than I am.”

Simon walked to the window and looked out at the still landscape. Between the house and the stone parapet which bordered a long slope to the shore, a huddle of small boats laid up for the winter in the shelter of the shallow harbour looked like children’s toys. At low tide the sandbanks would be uncovered and even at the quay, several miles away, no ship of more than about three thousand tons could moor, and, at that, the water in the small port had to be dredged continuously to maintain a sufficient depth.

Penelope studied the back view of her husband and then picked up the unexpected largesse of the gods, the promise of a cheque for fifty thousand pounds. It was almost impossible to credit the good fortune which had come through the letter-box that morning. It was Saturday, which accounted for Simon’s being at home and in his dressing-gown, and it also accounted for the absence of her three-year-old. With his sister aged six, she had taken him in the car to the dancing class which gave her a free couple of hours every Saturday morning and the undivided society of Simon, with whom, even after eight years of marriage, she was still sublimely in love.

She put the letter down as Simon came back to the breakfast-table.

“How keen are you on this world cruise?” he asked.

“Darling, it’s the dream of a life-time so far as I’m concerned.”

“Well, I’ve certainly got a Sabbatical coming up at the end of March, so perhaps we can find somebody mug enough to take on the kids.”

“It wouldn’t need to be just one person, you know. I agree it would be rather much to expect that. Couldn’t the aunts and uncles all take a share? And there’s that nice Mrs Gavin who is secretary to your great-aunt Dame Beatrice. Laura Gavin has always said her brother and sister-in-law would love us to go up to Scotland.”

“Yes—us as a family, not the children on their own.”

“Perhaps Mrs Gavin herself would take them up there.”

“We couldn’t suggest such a thing. What would great-aunt do for a secretary while Mrs Gavin was away? Besides, Mrs Gavin has brought up two children of her own. She won’t want to be saddled with two more.”

“Well, let’s think of somebody else. So long as we spread the load, I’m sure

people will help out.”

“Well, there’s Carey in Oxfordshire...”

“With all those pigs? The children would love to go there again. Then there’s Jonathan in the Cotswolds.”

“He and Deb had the kids for three weeks last summer, if you remember.”

“There weren’t any complaints and the children had a lovely time. I’m sure Jon would have them again, and great-aunt would have them in Hampshire and Laura would take them for picnics in the New Forest. On, darling, I’m sure it will all work out. Do write to the shipping companies or see a travel agent or something and then, as soon as we know definite dates, we can write to the relatives and get everything fixed up.”

“What about Rosamund’s schooling? This pillar-to-post business you’re suggesting isn’t going to do her education any good.”

“Darling, she’s only six!”

“The law of the land has laid down—”

“Oh, I know that, but listen! Deb used to be a college lecturer, Laura Gavin was trained as a teacher and surely nobody is going to bother about two small children on Carey’s farm in Oxfordshire? If they go to Scotland they can attend the local school—or not, as the case may be. They wouldn’t be up there for more than a fortnight, anyway, and if they spend the whole of May and June here at home with somebody to look after them, Rosamund can attend school as usual. I’ll go and see Mrs Trigg and explain the situation. She’s very understanding.”

“Considering the fees we pay, that hardly surprises me.”

“What’s in the other letter?”

“This?” Simon slit it open. “Oh, Lord! The local dramatic society want to stage *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* out of doors and would like the loan of our garden. It’s from Brian Yorke, and of course he’s been here and knows the set-up. The previous owner used to stage his own plays here and had the lawn terraced for the purpose.”

“Shall you agree?”

“Oh, yes. I owe Yorke a favour. The fairies and the lovers can prance in and out of our wilderness in the wild woods left-centre of the lawn, while we, with any luck, shall be out on the ocean blue and a thousand miles away from it all.”

“We *are* going, then?”

“If we can fix up the kids, but you mustn’t be disappointed if it doesn’t come off.”

“Our own midsummer night’s dream! Oh, it’s *got* to come off! What can

anybody have against the children?"

"Their youth, their boundless energy, the necessity for keeping an eye on them, their capacity for being wide awake and up and doing at six in the morning, their bath-times and Rosamund's non-stop questions and general precocity."

"She's intelligent, not precocious. You ought to be glad she wants to know about things."

"Other people may be less glad of it than I. But you've got your priorities wrong."

"How do you mean?"

"We must see our way clear about the kids before I see about a travel agent. I believe I said that before."

When his nephew's letter arrived at Jonathan Bradley's breakfast table he scanned the first page and uttered an anguished moan.

"Oh, darling, not bad news?" asked his wife Deborah.

"Bad news? You can say *that* again! It's only that Simon and Penelope want us to take a share in looking after Rosamund and Edmund this summer."

"Don't tell me they're getting a divorce!"

"No. They want to go on a world cruise. They've won a lot of money in a lottery—that new government thing—and apparently can't wait to blue some of it."

"I suppose it means Simon will take that Sabbatical which is due to him. I'm very glad. He works so hard, poor boy. *Of course* we'll have the children."

"That's all very well! My God! A three-month babysit if the rest of the relatives opt out! We should never survive it."

"Oh, nonsense, darling! The children are perfectly sweet and I'd love to have them. May I see the letter?"

Jonathan handed it over and, as his young relative had done, walked over to the window. Outside his Cotswold home lay the January snow, deep, limitless and shining, and the world was stilled in the hush that only snow can bring. At the foot of the long slope of the hill ran a little river and beyond the river rose the dark and bare-branched wood which hid the village from view.

"Didn't you get as far as the third page?" asked Deborah, as Jonathan turned round. "Simon suggests that we use their house for any part of the time we choose. There's the sea and the use of his boat, and he'll put you up for guest membership of the golf-club and he reminds us that Aunt Adela doesn't live all that far away. He is certain she and Laura will take the children off our hands for

a fortnight when we feel we must have a break.”

“He’s more certain about that than I am. Besides, with Laura in charge of them, the children would probably break their necks.”

“Her own children didn’t.”

“Look, Deb, it’s an absolute imposition and it’s definitely not on. I’ll write straight back and say so.”

“We are going to the Cotswolds,” said Rosamund to her brother.

“What’s Cotswolds?”

“Where Uncle Jon and Aunt Deb live. You went there for three weeks last summer. Don’t you remember? You ran down the hill and fell over.”

“Jack an’ Jill went up the hill to fetcher pailer water. Jack fell down an’ broke his crown an’ Jill came tumberling after. Did they really?”

“They did, if it says so. It’s printed in your book, so it must be true. They wouldn’t print anything that wasn’t true.”

“Was Jack a king?”

“He must have been if he had a crown. I expect he cried when he broke it. I cried when I broke my best dolly.”

“If I was a king I wouldn’t break my crown. I would wear it every day and every night.”

“You couldn’t wear it in bed and you couldn’t wear it all day.”

“I could! I could!”

“You would have to take it off to wash your hair.”

“Kings don’t wash their hair and they don’t get soap in their eyes.”

“Neither would you if you kept your eyes shut. Anyway, we’re going to stay with Uncle Jon and Auntie Deb in the Cotswolds. Mummy said so. She said Auntie Deb must have talked Uncle Jon into having us.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Yes, you do. There are dogs and rabbits and horses and a little donkey and geese and chickens and there’s almost sure to be a hound puppy like last time, and there’s the duck-pond and we can look for frogs and newts and those big snails Uncle Jon says you can eat, and we can dig up worms for the ducks and go into the woods and look for badger holes with the gamekeeper and find empty birds’ nests and paddle in the brook.”

“Will Uncle Jon give me a puppy of my very own if I go?”

“Cook says ‘them as don’t ask don’t want, and them as does ask shan’t have’, so I don’t know.”

“Cook is mistaken in her first premise, and her second argues little faith in

the efficacy of prayer,” said Simon, who had caught the end of the children’s conversation.

“Cook says prayers are only a way of asking God for the things nobody else will give you,” said his daughter.

“You are not to go into the kitchen and bother Cook.”

“I didn’t. I only heard what she said to Carrie. Are we really going to have a lot of new clothes?”

“Well, if you are going to stay with other people while we go on our second honeymoon, you must be kitted out decently, I suppose.”

“What’s a second honeymoon?”

“A compensation for the first one, which is hardly ever a success.”

“Why isn’t it?”

“The bride is nervous, the groom inadequate.”

“Is it compensation to give us a lot of new clothes?”

“No. It is for the sake of appearances. The compensation will be in the form of new toys. We shall take you to London to choose them for yourselves.”

“Can we eat at a real hotel?”

“Certainly. It will be part of the compensation.”

“Cook says conscience doth make cowards of us all.”

“Cook has an extraordinary faculty for hitting a nail on the head. When did she say that?”

“It was when Carrie’s brother had to marry his young woman.”

“I doubt whether that was a question of conscience, but we must give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I cannot prove who plastered one of my best shirts with your mother’s lipstick.”

“We were playing murders, so there had to be blood.”

“I appreciate that and as you were having a birthday party and there were guests present, I forbore to ask any questions.”

“Cook says you shouldn’t tell tales out of school.”

“Nor in it, either. You remember that.”

“So I didn’t tell you it was Bayard Thompson put the lipstick on your shirt.”

“Well, it’s all fixed, it seems,” said Simon, a few weeks later. “There was only a fortnight unaccounted for, but the Yorkes are going to fill in in return for use of this place for the play. What’s more, the dancing-class lady, Signora Moretti, is undertaking to coach the Midsummer Dream fairies in dance and

song, so Rosamund and Edmund will be in the play to that extent. I have only one misgiving. There are to be three performances and all of them in the evening. Lynn, the financier chap, is going to be Yorke's 'angel', so the costumes will be lavish, the lighting professional, amplifiers hitched up among the trees and the Ladies' Orchestra to supply the music. Heaven only knows what else he seems prepared to pay for. One thing: he can afford it."

"What are your misgivings?"

"The lateness of the hour at which the performances will close. The children will be kept up until eleven at night or later."

"No, as a matter of fact, they won't. I was talking to the signora when I took the children to dancing class last Saturday and she has made it a condition that the younger children will not be in the concluding scene at all. It can be played by Oberon, Titania and Puck, with members of the Ladies' Choral supplying the song and leaving out the last fairy dance. The small children will be released at the end of the first scene in the third act."

"Even then I suppose it will be long past their usual bedtime."

"It won't hurt them for just three nights and they can sleep on in the mornings. It will mean a fat fee for Signora Moretti if the children appear. We can't do her out of it. It's not as though the play itself is something from which the children can take any harm, and they'll adore being in it."

Chapter 2

Read-Through

“Is all our company here?
—You were best to call them generally, man by man,
according to the scrip.”



Cast it yourself,” said Donald Bourton. “You know what a lot of time got wasted and what ill-feeling there was when we had a casting committee last October for the Christmas play. No two members agreed about anything and the result was very nearly a fiasco. You’re producing and directing and it was you who got Lynn to put up the money. You ought to have your own way about allotting the parts.”

“That’s all very well, but it’s not so easy to take matters into one’s own hands with an amateur cast. With professionals you can say take it or leave it, but with people who are doing it for free, and with all the vested interests lined up against you, it’s not so simple. At least to have a committee does spread the load.”

“And mucks up the production. Anyway, it seems to me that this time there is only one vested interest to consider, and that’s Lynn himself. I take it that he’s not financing us purely out of the goodness of his heart.”

“No. He expects fat parts for himself, his wife and, to a lesser degree because the boy is doing his A-levels this year, something for his son.”

“Oh, well, he who pays the piper calls the tune. You’ll have to guide his choice a bit, that’s all.”

“It’s all very well to talk. He’s short and stout, as you know, and will probably want to play one of the lovers. He’s already bespoken a part for his spouse. He’s read the play and thinks she would make a good Hermia. I wanted your Barbara for that.”

“Cast Barbara as Helena and have the audience wondering why both the men wanted Hermia when Helena was in their midst. Barbara won’t mind what part she plays, so long as Lynn pays her. She is a professional, you know.”

“Well, perhaps the read-through will settle a few things, although I doubt it.

People always have such inflated ideas of what they can do on the stage.”

“I hate to mention it, but do I get a look-in anywhere?”

“So far as I’m concerned, you can have your pick of Lysander or Demetrius, unless Lynn picks one of them for himself. We must do our best to head him off if he does. There’s another thing which makes the casting a bit of a problem. Shakespeare, for obvious reasons, used as few women as he could, whereas in our lot we have far more women than men. In *The Dream* there are only four women’s parts and we haven’t enough men for the rest. We shall have to cast a woman as Oberon, I think, and perhaps for Egeus, Philostrate and one or two of the workmen.”

“Whoever plays Quince—and you *must* have a man for that, I think—could double as Egeus. They never appear together, and a girl could play Philostrate as a sort of glorified court page, couldn’t she?”

“Well, yes, and there’s Robina Lester for one of the workmen.”

“Yes, and a woman could do Flute. After all, Flute does take the part of Thisbe in the workmen’s play and it’s implicit in the text that he was little more than a boy. Doesn’t he say he has a beard coming? If it’s only coming (but not come), he can’t be more than about seventeen or so.”

“You know, I think I *will* cast it myself, once I know which parts Lynn has got his eye on for himself and his wife and son.”

“Well, if Emma Lynn, poor lost soul, wants to be Hermia, I shall opt for Demetrius. I’m hanged if I’m going to play Lysander opposite her.”

It turned out that Marcus Lynn had chosen Quince the Carpenter for himself and Hermia for Emma. He was frank about it.

“I’m not cut out for a lover. Anyway, I want a bossy part. I’m a bossy man. I’d have liked to play Bottom the Weaver, but there would be obvious jokes if my workers got to hear of it, my figure being such as it is, and that’s not good for discipline. I want Emma to show up well, and I guess Hermia is just about the best woman’s part. As for the lad, almost anything will do for him, the smaller the better. He’s got his A-levels coming up.”

The read-through was held at Brian Yorke’s house, which was in the old part of the town near the quay. It was family property which he had inherited from his father and was a well-built Georgian house fronting on to the high street, but having a pleasant garden at the back. Here the children who had small speaking parts were sent out to amuse themselves, including Yorke’s nine-year-old daughter, who was put in charge of the younger ones, Rosamund, Edmund and two tiny creatures, all white teeth and smiles, the coffee-coloured progeny of

Doctor Fitzroy and his wife. These two highly-qualified local practitioners were descended from French settlers in Mauritius and their sons rejoiced in the names of Ganymede and Lucien Fitzroy-Delahague.

Inside the house the adults were assembled in a well-proportioned, gracious room in which the furniture was a trifle shabby but was comfortable enough and where the high windows looked out on to one of the town alleys in which its houses had once been lodgings for sailors whose ships paid off at the port.

The doctor's wife, Jeanne-Marie, lighter in colour than her children and very beautiful, had been cast as Oberon, but, having dumped her offspring, she apologised for not staying, explaining that she and her husband (they were partners) had a heavy surgery and that she would pick up the children later, so Deborah, who had brought Rosamund and Edmund with her, was called upon to read the part.

Emma Lynn, obviously years younger than her husband but equally obviously under his domination, struggled valiantly with Hermia's lines but was completely overshadowed by Barbara Bourton's reading of Helena. ("Call you me fair?—that fair again unsay!") The frustration, the bitterness, the longing were all there. Barbara was a professional actress of some note and was, as she expressed it, 'between shows' until the autumn. For that reason she was available to take part in *The Dream*.

At a pause in the reading Marcus Lynn said, "I'm having entirely new costumes for the play. I read how Queen Elizabeth I used to delight in dressing up her boy actors in silks and velvet and jewels, so I thought we'd have a ball. I'm expecting the costumiers along about now to measure up for the principal parts, and then, as soon as the final casting is settled, they can get busy. It's a biggish cast, so they'll have plenty to do."

"That is probably them now," said Brian.

The measuring and note-taking were soon done, but before the rehearsal was resumed Lynn said, "And I want everything as authentic as possible so, although I shan't release them until the dress rehearsal—they're valuable and some are irreplaceable, if you'll forgive my mentioning it—I thought the men might like to look over my collection of swords and daggers and get their eye on one they might fancy wearing. Come along to my house at any time. If I'm not there Emma will show them to you. I've brought along one I'm going to have copied, because, of course, there's one dagger which certainly won't be for real, and that's the one Pyramus uses in the workmen's play when he's supposed to stab himself."

“He does that by sticking the dagger under his armpit, I thought,” said Tom Woolidge, “so it doesn’t need a special dagger, does it?”

“Oh, the dagger Pyramus—that’s you, Rinkley—will use will look like the real thing, but it will have a retractable blade. That under-the-arm stuff is very unrealistic.”

“The whole of the workmen’s play is unrealistic. It’s pure farce,” said Robina Lester.

“All the same, to use a real dagger might be dangerous. We shall be out of doors and under floodlighting, remember,” said Brian Yorke, “and if Pyramus or Thisbe—they both commit suicide—were to make a boss shot, the consequences might be serious.”

“When do I get the retractable dagger to practise with?” asked Rinkley.

“Oh, I’ve put it in hand already,” Marcus Lynn replied.

“I’ll need it to rehearse with, too,” said young Susan Hythe. ‘I’m supposed to draw it out of him and stick it in myself, and practice makes perfect. I think it would be funniest if I put my foot on his chest while he’s lying there supposed to be dead, and made a sort of a terrific heave and fell over backwards, don’t you? I mean, we’ve got to play for laughs, haven’t we?”

“Not *your* laughs at *my* expense,” said Rinkley. “You kindly remember that *I’m* the centre-piece of those workmen’s scenes, not you.”

“Oh, it’s too soon to talk of ‘business’ yet,” said Brian Yorke. “We’ll see how it goes in rehearsal when everybody knows the lines.”

Yorke, who had cast himself as Theseus, took his readers only to the end of the second act. This gave everybody a chance to speak and included the children, but before the party broke up and when drinks had been provided, Emma Lynn came over to Deborah and said, “Will you take on my part as Hermia?”

“Good Lord, no! Of course I won’t. Why?”

“I’m a mess. I didn’t want to be in the play, anyway, only my husband was so keen on it. He’s really putting it on for me, you know, but I can’t act.”

“You’ll be all right when we start rehearsing. This was only a read-through. It didn’t mean a thing.”

“You ought to have a better part.”

“I’ve got the one I opted for. I’m going to be Wall in the workmen’s play. I was only a stand-in tonight. At college they would always cast me as Desdemona or Ophelia and in my third year I was St Joan and *most* unconvincing.”

“It meant you can act, though. I can’t act and I can’t make anybody want to

listen to me when I speak, and I couldn't make any actor pretend to fall in love with me, however much I tried."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Deborah. "Your husband certainly wouldn't agree."

"Oh, Marcus fell in love with my money, not with me."

Deborah tried not to look as embarrassed as she felt and, to relieve the situation, she said impulsively:

"Look here, I'll tell you what. I used to lecture in Eng. lit. before I married, and I know *The Dream* backwards. If you've got any free afternoons, why don't you come along to our place and I'll read your cues for you so that you really soak up the part and make it your own? We'll do it indoors first and then have a go in the garden so that you get used to speaking in the open air. Even with amplifiers it's quite different from playing a scene indoors, I always think."

"What about your husband?"

"He can take the children down to the beach or somewhere. Jonathan isn't any problem."

"How happy some o'er other some can be," said Emma, with an effort to produce a smile. "I'd be better as Helena than as Hermia, if I've got to be one of them, especially now I've heard Mrs Bourton read the part."

"Well, swop over parts. Look, Mrs Bourton is just being helped on with her coat. Helena *would* suit you better. Come on, let's see how she reacts and then we can tell Mr Yorke. I don't suppose *he'll* have any objection, so long as you and she are satisfied."

"Well, it's up to you, I suppose," said Marcus Lynn, "though I would have liked to see you in the plummier part. After all, I am standing Sam for this do."

"Well, you know, Marcus, I really couldn't do Hermia, but Mrs Bradley thinks I will be quite all right as Helena. She says I've got the 'feel' of the part already. She's been wonderful, the way she's helping me."

"That's another thing. If she's coaching you she'll expect to be paid. Well, I don't grudge it. You'd better find out what the figure is."

"Oh, Marcus, she said nothing about *coaching* me. Besides, I couldn't mention *money* to her! She's a lady."

"Oh, well—"

"And I do hope *you* won't mention it, either. She would be so offended that she might stop helping me. In fact, I know she would. You can't offer those sort of people money."

"Not my experience of the world, but have it your own way. I suppose I can always give her a thumping present after the show. Probably cost more than

paying her, but I expect I can shoulder the overheads.”

“Thank you, Marcus. You are very kind-hearted. The only thing is—”

“Well?”

“I don’t think she would like an expensive present, either, and perhaps her husband wouldn’t like you to give her one. It might—well—suggest something to him, don’t you think, you being a man?”

“Well,” said Marcus again, looking in the mirror and smirking as he straightened his tie, “there could be that, I suppose.”

“She’s so beautiful, you see,” said Emma wistfully. “Anybody could be excused for—well, you know.”

“There’s one fellow who wouldn’t be excused—not, at any rate, by Bradley (God help us, what a gorilla!) and that’s Rinkley.”

“Oh, dear, yes!” said Emma, grateful to get away from the subject of emoluments or presents to Deborah. “It was quite frightening, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, any red-blooded chap would have done the same,” said Marcus, trying to make himself look taller and slimmer than nature had allowed for, “and Rinkley had better watch his step. If he tries any of his antics on Madam Dr Fitzroy-Delahague, that husband of hers will put a knife in his ribs, Hippocratic Oath notwithstanding.”

“Oh, Dr Jeanne-Marie Delahague has turned down the part. Says that a doctor’s hours are so uncertain that at the last minute she might have to let us all down. Her husband agrees, but the two little boys are to stay in as elves and Deborah Bradley has promised to look after them and to put them to bed in her house after each performance, so that nobody need come and take them home.”

“Deborah Bradley ought to be a Boy Scout,” said Marcus, “except that she’s all woman and as goodlooking as they come.”

“It was Rudyard Kipling’s Kim who was the friend of all the world,” said Emma. Marcus looked surprised, but made no comment except to remark that Emma must be a deeper reader than he had supposed.

It was after the second read-through—“just to get you accustomed to picking up your cues, ladies and gentlemen, as the actual words you are to learn will present no difficulties, for this is a lovely play”—that Deborah was asked whether she would take on the part of Titania.

“But you’ve got others to choose from,” she said, “and, anyway, I’m too old for the part.”

“Titania is a fairy and the fairies are immortal,” said Donald Bourton gallantly. “I’m swopping Demetrius for Oberon and I’d love to play opposite

you.”

“So who is playing Demetrius?” asked Valerie Yorke, who was Hippolyta. “We haven’t any more men.”

“Bradley is a handsome, saturnine chap,” said Tom Woolidge, who was playing Lysander. “Would *he* do it?”

“He’s in the garden with the children,” said Valerie. “Perhaps somebody could go and fish him inside and you can ask him.”

“You can bring a horse to water,” said Deborah, “but—”

“Bradley was in the OUDS,” said Tom Woolidge.

“Well!” said Deborah. “I never knew *that* before! I think you must mean *Simon* Bradley, our young cousin, to whom this house belongs.”

“No, no, Jonathan was the name,” said Woolidge.

So the chief parts were settled and the final casting (with Yorke keeping his fingers crossed) was to be programmed thus:

Theseus — Brian Yorke (Producer and Director)

Hippolyta — Valerie Yorke

Lysander — Tom Woolidge

Demetrius — Jonathan Bradley

Hermia — Barbara Bourton

Helena — Emma Lynn

Oberon — Donald Bourton

Titania — Deborah Bradley

Puck — Peter Woolidge

Quince — Marcus Lynn (Prologue)

Bottom — Nicholas Rinkley (Pyramus)

Flute — Susan Hythe (Thisbe)

Yorke had decided upon one change in the minor characters, but did not announce it at the second reading. It proved to have some importance later. His nine-year-old daughter had been cast provisionally as the solitary fairy who talks with Puck, but Yorke thought her too tall and wanted her as Philostrate. When she was told this later, Yolanda, an amiable child, welcomed the change and, although, again, it was not mentioned at the meeting, the fairy part, which carried a quite considerable speech, was given to Rosamund. Another member of Signora Moretti’s dancing class was brought in as Peasblossom, Rosamund’s original part, and both were pleased when, later, they were told.

Yorke did consult Deborah about this change, but asked her to say nothing until he had convinced himself that the change would be advantageous.

“But if you do as well with the young as you are doing with Emma Lynn,” he said, “the thing is in the bag. I’ve never known such a change in anybody as you’ve made in that submerged lady. Miraculous!”

“It’s all done with mirrors,” said Deborah. To Jonathan, later, she added, “All that poor girl needed was a bit of self-confidence. I don’t know why she lacked it. She’s really quite pretty when she gets animated, and I’m sure Lynn is fond of her.”

“Probably scared of letting him down, then,” said Jonathan. “After all, she hasn’t given him a son, and a man with Lynn’s business acumen must want one to carry on the firm.”

“There’s an adopted boy, Jasper.”

“Not the same thing. Anyway, I’m grateful to you for our two boys, and that reminds me. They want to get down here for the Saturday performance of the play. I’m not having any of that nonsense, though.”

“I’d love them to come. It’s good of them to bother. Why don’t you want them to be there?”

Jonathan laughed.

“What! Have them come and see me making love to another woman?”

“Yes,” said Deborah, “there is that. I get quite a qualm when I watch you and Barbara Bourton on stage together. You are so very convincing and she is so accomplished and beautiful. I’m *very* glad Hermia prefers Lysander to Demetrius, but you with your ‘Relent, sweet Hermia’ would melt a heart of stone.”

“That’s what I had to do when I wanted you to marry me. Just part of my technique, that’s all.”

“Oh, yes? And what about that little scene in the woods?” She mocked it. “ ‘Oh, why rebuke you him that loves you so?’ ”

“Well, why do you?” asked Jonathan, laughing. “Anyway, what about you and the handsome, virile Donald? You both turn that quarrel scene into a lovers’ tiff. It’s disgraceful how seductive you are and how he reacts, although he’s supposed to be having the devil of a set-to with you. His ‘Why should Titania cross her Oberon?’ is a masterpiece of snaky pleading, and his masterful rendering of ‘Tarry, rash wanton; am I not thy lord?’ is every suburban lady’s dream of being dominated by a sunburnt, cleanlimbed chap in riding-boots and a solar topee astride his Arab stallion.”

“Thank you very much! I admit the charge,” said Deborah, enjoying the game, although she knew it was a slightly dangerous one, “but please compare

my pert reply. You can hardly call *that* love-making.”

“Why not? Titania is obviously eaten up with jealousy. She reminds him that he, in the shape of Corin, sat all day playing on pipes of corn and versing love to amorous Phillida. If you ask me, Titania was desperate to share Oberon’s bed and company once more.”

“I’m sure she was, and anyway, the play ends with everybody happy. I’ll tell you whose behaviour is going to queer the pitch unless Brian Yorke can do something about it. What about that wretched man Rinkley?”

“First, he’s the best male actor we’ve got and Yorke can’t afford to upset him; second, he’s a heel; third, he was mixed up in some unsavoury case concerning a young girl. I note that Yorke keeps an eye on things where Yolanda is concerned. Rinkley has already stirred *me* to action, as you know.”

“Not only that. If he continues to make snide remarks about Robina Lester, her son, young David, is going to blow up.”

“Well, Robina does over-act, and the workmen’s scenes really are Rinkley’s, you know.”

“But it’s not his business to correct her. That’s Brian’s job. I’m sure that as soon as everybody is word-perfect and we really get our teeth into the play, he’ll tone her down.”

“Anyway, Rinkley is just as rude to Susan Hythe and Caroline Frome as he is to Robina.”

“I know, and that doesn’t help matters. Young David has taken a protective attitude towards those two girls ever since the first reading. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Of course, but they have no time for anybody but Tom Woolidge, I thought.”

“That won’t stop David lying in wait for Rinkley in a dark alley one night if he keeps on twitting them the way he does. As for Thisbe, she isn’t very good at present, but once she gets the feel of the part she’ll be all right. All the workmen will. It’s a nuisance we have to put three women in as Flute, Snout and Starveling, but it’s Hobson’s choice. There simply are not enough men to go round.”

“Men won’t accept minor rôles in an amateur show. I think it’s rather noble of Lynn, considering he’s putting up all the money, merely to have cast himself as Quince. I should have thought he would opt for Theseus, at the very least, if only from the costume point of view.”

“I expect he realises his limitations as an actor.”

“He’s about the only one of the cast who does, then. Why are amateur actors always so damned conceited?”

“Donald Bourton *does* make love to me on stage,” said Deborah suddenly, “but he behaves perfectly off it, and that’s all that matters.”

“I hope it stays that way for his sake.”

“You are not to treat him the way you treated Rinkley.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t. I should *really* hurt him. Anyway, it’s getting late. ‘Lovers, to bed. ’Tis almost fairy time. I fear we shall outsleep the coming morn.’ Not that I think there’s much chance of it while Rosamund and Edmund are in the house and raising hell the minute the sun rises, if not earlier.”

“I only wish I had half their energy. Still, we don’t bear all the brunt, do we? Carey and Jenny have been awfully good, and Aunt Adela is to have them after they’ve been to Scotland.”

“And now,” said Brian Yorke, “that we all have some idea of our parts, do, please, darlings, put away those scripts and let us see how far we can get without them, shall we?”

“I can’t get *anywhere* without mine,” wailed Susan Hythe. “I know my lines, but I don’t know where to come in.”

“We’ll all help you, dear,” said the motherly Robina Lester. “What *I* want to know,” she went on, turning to Brian Yorke, “is what happens if one of us, particularly somebody in a major rôle, goes sick or, for any other reason, can’t turn up on the night.”

“I’ve thought about that,” said Brian. “You had better double as Hippolyta if Valerie can’t be with us.”

“How can I? It’s all right in the early scenes, but we’re on together in the last scene.”

“We can adjust the dialogue in the last scene so that Hippolyta doesn’t appear. In the same way, Susan had better familiarise herself with Hermia’s part, and Caroline, you’ll have to be the stand-in for Helena. The women’s gaps will be easy enough to fill.”

“What about Titania?” asked Donald Bourton, making a gesture indicating a desire to put an arm round Deborah.

“Again, perfectly simple. Valerie had better learn her lines. Hippolyta and Titania don’t come on together. No, it’s the men we have to cater for. It’s a pity the play needs nine of them. As it is, we have to give men’s parts to Robina, Caroline and Susan, not to mention little Yolanda as Philostrate, but I’m sure the ladies will do fine. Now, to double up on the men’s rôles—the actual, *real* men’s

men I mean—I think the basic part to cover is Bottom.”

“I should hope so!” said Rinkley, with an unpleasant snigger.

“Well, it can’t be me,” said Tom Woolidge. “I am no good at all in a comedy part. Passed to you, partner.”

“Oh, all right,” said Jonathan, “but if I read my fellow Thespian aright, nothing short of a third world war will prevent him from displaying his talents.”

“Too right, dear boy,” said Rinkley. “Even if I’m dead, I shan’t lie down.”

The company then went into rehearsal again and, when it was over at ten, Jonathan and Deborah invited Lynn and his Emma, Yorke and his Valerie, Bourton and his Barbara—all the married couples, in short, to stay for drinks. It was at this friendly little session that what turned out to be a momentous decision was made.

“You know, Jonathan,” said Yorke, looking at his handsome, saturnine host, “I don’t think you have the face for comedy. If you ever have to stand in for Pyramus, I mean.”

Jonathan walked over to a mirror and solemnly scrutinised himself.

“Not the face for comedy? Perhaps you are right,” he said, turning round. “Anyway, as I said to Rinkley, the occasion will not arise. Nothing is going to prevent Rinkley from treading the boards.”

“Actually,” said Donald Bourton, “I could fill in for him, you know, if it ever came to the crunch. He is in scenes with Titania and Puck, but never with Oberon. I’ve always wanted to play Bottom.”

“But your fatal good looks have always been against you,” said his wife, giving him a playful flick on the cheek.

“Well, yes, Oberon *would* be a better swop,” said Yorke seriously. “There’s really no need for anybody except Puck to appear at the end of the play. There won’t be any fairies, anyway, because all the kids will be in bed, and there’s not much point in having Oberon and Titania without their fairy train and a torchlight procession and all that. You might have to double up for Lysander or Demetrius or me, Donald, as well, so you might as well learn the whole play.”

“I know it already,” said Donald. “One of these days I’ll do you a one-man show. Well, no, not quite a one-man show. I must be allowed a partner, for what says the play? ‘Jack shall have Jill; Nought shall go ill; The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.’ ”

“One of these days Bradley will boot that fellow into the harbour,” said Marcus Lynn to Brian Yorke.

“Not until the play is over, I trust,” said Brian. “Bourton can’t swim.”

Chapter 3

Mouths of Babes

“I’ll speak in a monstrous little voice.”



W e can only stay a week,” said Rosamund importantly.

“Dear, dear! How sad for Mrs Gavin and me,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Yes, I think it is, but, you see, we are going to be in a real grown-up play, and we’ll be wanted for rehearsals. All Signora Moretti’s dancing class are in it, but the rest of them only dance and sing. *We* have real parts. *We speak*.”

“Very impressive. Congratulations,” said Laura Gavin.

“I am an elf,” said Edmund.

“Great! What do you have to say?” asked Laura.

“And I and I and I. Where shall we go, go, go?”

“You only say it once,” said his sister.

“I say it all. I am going to have paint all over my face, so nobody knows it’s me,” Edmund confided to Dame Beatrice.

“He thinks so,” said Rosamund. “I am a fairy. There are three elves and a fairy. I am called Peasblossom.”

“A delightful name,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Yes. I ought to be in white, like garden peas, but Signora Moretti said I shall have a pink tunic and pink shoes and a lovely pink hat. Signora said I shall. The other elves—not Edmund—are called Ganymede and Lucien. They are black. Well, they are not really black, they are more brown, and they laugh all the time. Their father and mother are doctors and they are lethal.”

“I hope not,” said Laura. “You mean they are legal—legal immigrants.”

“Ganymede is called Moth and Lucien is Mustardseed. He will be all in yellow with pom-poms on his hat. I would rather be in pink than yellow.”

“Pink is for embarrassment, yellow for cowardice,” said Laura. “What about the other two?”

“Lucien is to be all different colours and have wings. He is to be like a butterfly. I think that’s silly, because moths aren’t like butterflies, are they?—

well, not really.”

“As you say. What about Edmund?”

“I shall have a crown,” said Edmund.

“No, you won’t. You are called Cobweb.” Rosamund turned to Dame Beatrice. “He thinks he will have a crown, but he will have a silver tunic with sparkles on it like dewdrops and a kind of angel thing on his head with tinsel all over it in crisscross.”

“A halo in the form of a cobweb,” suggested Laura.

“What’s a halo?”

“A nimbus. A kind of angel thing, as you said.”

“Edmund had one on his head at Christmas when he was an angel in the cavity play.”

“Nativity play.”

“Nativity play. He had a halo and he was an angel.”

“So he is an old hand so far as the stage is concerned,” said Dame Beatrice admiringly.

“He was naughty. He picked up the Baby Jesus and threw it at one of the shepherds.”

“It was only a doll,” said Edmund. “I wanted it to be a real Baby Jesus and it wasn’t. It was only a doll.”

“You were right to discard it. Never accept inferior substitutes for the real thing,” said Dame Beatrice.

“I like pigs better than sheep,” said Rosamund. “Uncle Carey has got millions and millions of pigs. The sow hadn’t got enough teats for all the little pigs, so Aunt Jenny had to feed the littlest one out of a bottle. It was called Runt, but I called it Grunt. It waxed and grew fat, Uncle Carey said, and now it follows Aunt Jenny all over the house and won’t have anything to do with the other pigs. Aunt Jenny says it thinks it’s one of us.”

“I hope it’s house-trained,” said Laura.

“No, it isn’t. You can’t house-train a pig, Uncle Carey says, any more than you can house-train a horse. I would love a little tiny horse for a pet.”

“You’ve been round and about quite a bit, haven’t you, these last weeks?”

“Oh, yes, it’s been lovely, and Mummy sends us postcards from all the places where the ship calls. We went to Scotland for a fortnight, too, didn’t we?”

“Oh, yes, to my brother’s house. I took you, didn’t I? I’m sorry I couldn’t stay,” said Laura.

“If he’s your brother, why is his name Menzies?”

“It used to be my name before I married. Women change their surnames when they marry. Before your Aunt Deb married your Uncle Jon her name was Miss Deborah Katherine St Piran Cloud.”

“That’s a nice name. Will you let me do it on your typewriter?”

“Yes, if your fingers aren’t sticky. What did you do in Scotland after I left?”

“We crawled on our bellies and saw the deer, and a wild cat killed one of the chickens.”

“What else?”

“We ate our porridge standing up.”

“Where is *The Dream* to be staged?”

“In our garden. It’s an annual event, but we’ve never been in it before. Generally it’s done in the Town Hall, but this time it’s to be outdoors, so I think that’s why Uncle Jon and Auntie Deb and us are in it, because they want to use our garden. Well, they’d have to let us be in it, wouldn’t they?”

“To think that one so young can be so cynical!”

“What’s cynercal?”

“According to the Oxford Dictionary, it means being incredulous of human goodness,” said Dame Beatrice.

“What’s incredilous?”

“Incredulous,” said Laura.

“Incredulous. What is it?”

“Not believing, O Socrates.”

“What’s Sockertees?”

“Oh, my God!”

“Is that swearing?”

“No, it’s a cry for help, in this instance.”

“Are you sorry we’re only staying a week?”

“Ask me that again when the week is up,” said Laura. “Let’s go and look for bluebells in the woods.”

“We’re not allowed to pick the wild flowers. Mummy says we’re conversationists.”

“One of you is, at any rate, and who said anything about picking them? Anyway, I rather fancy you mean conservationists.”

“Yes. Wild flowers are not very interesting when you’re not allowed to pick them, though, are they? Why is it all right for Jasper Lynn to pick the wild flowers if we mustn’t?”

“Who is Jasper Lynn?”

“A big boy. He belongs to Mr and Mrs Lynn and he picked the wild flowers to give to Mrs Bourton and he’s Egeus. It is only a little part and a girl was going to have it, but when Mrs Lynn said Jasper must be in it, Mr Lynn said, ‘only a little part then, he’s got his A-levels’, so Mr Yorke said, ‘what about Egeus? We could paint some wrinkles on him and give him a beard’.”

“So Jasper is Egeus. Does he want the part? It’s not a very attractive one, to my way of thinking—just a bossy old father objecting to his daughter marrying the man of her choice,” said Laura.

“Jasper didn’t want to be in it at all at first, but when Auntie Deb told Mrs Lynn how to be Helena and Mrs Lynn said Mrs Bourton ought to be Hermia, Jasper said he would be Egeus and Mr Lynn laughed a lot and said a good chance to stand there and make sheep’s eyes at Barbara. What does that mean?—make sheep’s eyes?”

“Calf-love. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Uncle Jon had a calf when we went last year. It was a lovely little bull-calf and when you sang the French anthem it would join in.”

“Extraordinary.”

“Yes, it was. It wouldn’t join in any other song, only in the—how do you say it?”

“*La Marseillaise*. How patriotic of it. I knew a French breed had been introduced over here, but I did not know it could sing.”

“It sang like Edmund. Jasper Lynn can sing. He sang about a melody that’s sweetly played in tune. Well, it wouldn’t be a melody if it wasn’t, would it?”

“You know what a melody is, then?”

“I asked Jasper. Mr Yorke said Jasper didn’t ought to wear a sword because Egeus was an old man and an old man wouldn’t want to fight anybody, but Jasper said a sword was part of a gentleman’s dress, but he would settle for a dagger, and Mr Lynn said a good actor always let the producer have the last word, so Jasper was nasty and said all right, he would get himself a sword and Mr Lynn said, ‘Not one of mine you won’t, if Brian says not’, and Mr Yorke said, ‘It’s a moot point and I don’t stand upon points.’ What’s moot?”

“Debatable.”

Rosamund looked at her for further enlightenment, but none came, so she dismissed the matter in a practical way by saying that Peter Woolidge had taught her how to turn two somersaults, one after the other, and finish standing up.

“But he can do all sorts of things,” she went on. “He put two chairs together and turned a running somersault right over them without touching them.”

“I used to be able to do that,” said Laura, “but not nowadays, worse luck.”

“No, you are too old. Jasper Lynn isn’t old, though, so he is to have a beard in the play.”

“*And a sword?*”

“I expect so, because he turned nasty and said he wasn’t going to wear a beard, so I think they will give in about the sword if he wears the beard.”

“I can hardly wait to see this play of yours, although all the dramatic interest seems to take place off-stage.”

“Uncle Jon will invite you. Us and the other elves and fairies—they don’t speak, they only mostly dance—we are all going to sing a song. Shall I sing it to you? It’s all about come not near our fairy queen. I’m not sure I know it yet, and I don’t think the little black boys and Edmund ever *will* know it, but Uncle Jon says it will be all right on the night. Why is it called *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“One of the fairies has a bigger part than me, but she’s nine. Her name is Yolanda and her daddy is the inducer.”

“Producer,” said Laura automatically.

“Much must have told in her favour,” said Dame Beatrice, “especially her father’s eminence.”

“Cook says kissing goes by favour. She said it when the milkman gave Carrie a rose, but he picked it off one of our bushes. I saw him. And Cook said it again when she knew that Mummy and Daddy were going all round the world on a ship, and then she said rolling stones gather no moss. What does that mean?”

“Perhaps you and Edmund would like to go into the kitchen. Henri will show you how to make gingerbread men,” said Dame Beatrice.

“We would rather make stick-jaw toffee.”

“What? Do you want to spend the rest of your lives with the dentist?” demanded Laura. “A very strange view some people take of their future! Ever heard of digging your grave with your teeth?”

“That’s silly. You couldn’t dig anything with your teeth. You’d get all dirt in your mouth. Last term a boy called Roger put all dirt in my mouth and my daddy told Roger’s daddy and Roger’s daddy put Roger over his knee and smacked him a lot of times, so now Roger only puts out his tongue at me. He doesn’t put dirt in my mouth any more, but Cook says what won’t fat ’ull fill.”

“Surely she didn’t say that about Roger putting dirt in your mouth?” asked Laura.

“No. She said it when she saw Saunders eating a raw carrot. Cook said raw carrots give you worms. I found a caterpillar once in my salad. Have you ever found a caterpillar in your salad?”

“No, thank goodness. Let’s change the subject. I thought you and Edmund were going to sing your fairy song.”

“Not Edmund. Mummy says he’s got a voice like a corncrake. What’s a—”

“Don’t ask me. I’ll ask you and then tell you. What’s a corncrake? It’s a noisy bird which lives in long grass and goes *ark, ark, ark*.”

“ ‘Ark, ’ark, ’ark, while infanvoicers sing! ’Ark, ’ark, ’ark, while infanvoicers sing loud ozanner, loud ozanner, loud ozanner to our king. Jack fell down an’ broke his crown, so he couldn’t be a king any more,” contributed Edmund, first in corncrake, unmelodious chant and finishing with a serious statement directed at Laura and obviously offered as a challenge.

“It doesn’t mean a real crown,” she informed him. “It means that when he fell down he got a nasty bump on the top of his head.”

“I prefer Edmund’s interpretation,” said Dame Beatrice. “It is far more interesting and dramatic than yours.”

“Shall I sing now?” asked Rosamund, unwilling that the limelight should pass to her brother.

“Yes, tip us your stave,” said Laura. “Is it ‘You spotted snakes with double tongue’?”

“Yes. What does double tongue mean?”

“Forked tongue. You’ve seen snakes at the zoo, haven’t you? In Red Indian parlance I believe it means saying one thing and meaning something else.”

“Oh, *I* know! Like when Mr Yorke said to Mr Lynn that *of course* Mrs Lynn must be Hermia, but he really meant Mrs Bourton ought to be Hermia. When Mr Bourton was talking to Mr Woolidge afterwards he called Mrs Lynn ‘that silly moo’ and said they’d be lucky if she didn’t dish the whole show. He said, ‘But old Lynn is doing all the subbing up, so Yorke has got to kow-tow to him.’ What’s kow-tow?”

“A polite Japanese obeisance offered from necessity rather than from self-deprecation,” said Dame Beatrice. Rosamund stared at her in silence, then put her feet together and her hands behind her back and treated the company to ‘You spotted snakes with double tongue’. Her audience had been augmented by Henri, who stood beaming in the doorway with two small flowered aprons over his arm. When the song was ended he said:

“If Madame pleases, all is in readiness for the making of toffee.”

“*Well!*” said Laura, as the children ran off to the kitchen.

“We have been out-generalled by a superior tactician,” said Dame Beatrice. “The ground had already been prepared.”

“Sappers and miners have been at work. That frightful kid will end up in gaol,” said Laura.

“From what she disclosed in her last oration, I think her choice of ‘inducer’ rather than ‘producer’ was an inspired one,” said Dame Beatrice. “The most that anyone misguided enough to direct or produce an amateur dramatic society’s offerings can hope for is to *induce* the members to play their parts as he wishes. Without monetary compensation, few are prepared to surrender their own ideas merely to contribute to the common good.”

“Don’t eat that if you don’t want it, Rosamund,” said Dame Beatrice, turning a sympathetic eye on the valiant struggles of her young guest. Rosamund laid down her implements and sighed.

“Cook says ‘better belly bust than good stuff be lost’,” she observed. “She said it when Carrie had to come in and clean up the floor after Edmund.”

“I was sick,” said Edmund.

“No, you weren’t. You were naughty. He was only two,” explained Rosamund, turning to Laura, “but he was naughty. He said, ‘You gave me too much’, and he threw his plate of stewed fruit and custard on the floor.”

“Well, that was one way of dealing with the surplus,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Yes, but then he wanted a banana and Daddy said no, and Mummy said, ‘He knows what he wants’, and let him have one and he kept looking at Daddy and eating the banana so fast he got it all over his face and up into his hair, but he ate it all, so Mummy was right. Yolanda’s mummy was going to look after us for a fortnight when we go home, but they are having Mr Rinkley to stay with them while his flat is being done up, and he won’t be gone before we get back and they have only one spare room. I don’t like Mr Rinkley.”

“Because he is bagging the spare room?” asked Laura.

“No. He kept picking me up and throwing me in the air and catching me like he does Yolanda, and Auntie Deb said, ‘Please don’t do that. Rosamund doesn’t like it’, so then Mr Rinkley laughed and did it again, and Uncle Jon said, ‘You heard my wife, you oaf’—what’s an oaf?”

“A person of low origin and few manners.”

“So Uncle Jon punched Mr Rinkley in the stomach and Auntie Deb said, ‘Oh, *please!*’ and Mr Bourton said, ‘Play around with girls your own size, Rinkley, and leave small kids alone’, and Mr Yorke said, ‘Steady on, Bourton’,

and Mr Rinkley went outside and was sick.”

“My, my! You do have fun at your rehearsals!” said Laura.

“Yes, so Mr Rinkley didn’t come to the next rehearsal, but it’s all right now. Mr Rinkley said, ‘I’m sorry I upset your dignity, little lady’, and I said, ‘I’m sorry I don’t like you’, and everybody laughed, but afterwards Mr Bourton said to Mr Woolidge, ‘What a swine that fellow is! I wish Yorke would kick him out of the play. He’s a something child mole-star’. What’s a something child mole-star?”

“A man who tosses little girls into the air when he has been told they don’t like it. Incidentally, did Cook ever remark that little pitchers have long ears?” asked Laura, anxious to change the subject. Rosamund considered the question, then shook her head and turned to other matters of interest, as Laura intended that she should.

“We have the rehearsals at *our* house now,” she said, “so people can get used to talking out of doors. They do our fairy scenes first and then we are sent upstairs, but Yolanda and I come down again and hide and listen. When Yolanda’s daddy gets cross he calls everybody ‘darling’. That’s how they know he is cross with them. He said, ‘Rinkley, darling boy, do you *have* to put your arm round Flute’s waist? Miss Hythe is supposed to be your fellow workman, not a girl you’re trying to chat up’. So Mr Rinkley said a lot of it went on in Shakespeare’s time and anyway he was only building up to the Pyramus and Thisbe scene when Miss Hythe really *would* be a girl, but Mr Yorke—that’s Yolanda’s daddy—he said, ‘Cut it out, darling boy, just to please *me*. Back to “Answer as I call you”, everybody, please, and, Robina, darling, *do* try to look as though you’re taking an interest in what the others are saying, and Caroline, darling, I know Starveling is a tailor, but it isn’t necessary for you to play the whole scene pretending to be stitching or else waving your arms in the air’, and Miss Frome said, ‘Sorry. It will look better when we can use the “props”. It’s supposed to be my tailoring shears I’m waving,’ and Mr Yorke said, ‘You wouldn’t have brought your shears to the workmen’s rehearsal. Be more imaginative, darling, and, anyway, you mustn’t distract attention from the person who is actually speaking. It’s an old ham’s trick and you are not to use it’.”

“You must be learning a great deal about play-acting from Mr Yorke,” said Dame Beatrice. “Shall we adjourn? I see that George is bringing the dogs out for their run.”

“I wish they were little tiny ponies,” said Rosamund.

“I hadda little pony his name was Dappergay I lent him to a lady to ride-a-

mile-away she stroked him she fed him she hadda lovely ride, she brought him backateventime a-walking by his side,” said Edmund, finishing up breathless.

“We don’t let him know the real words because of kindness to animals,” said Rosamund.

“Ought one to point out to that all-too-intelligent infant that she ought not to listen-in to the rehearsals when she is not supposed to be present?” asked Laura, when the children had gone out.

“It would be wrong to saddle her with a guilty conscience when she listens in next time, as, of course, she will, whether we point out her error of taste or not.”

“Do you think she represses Edmund too much?”

“From what we have heard, he seems capable of asserting himself when he feels it necessary. Besides, in a few years’ time his innate aggressiveness and his masculine ego will provide self-assertion enough and to spare, I fancy.”

“I wish I didn’t enjoy listening to Rosamund’s disclosures. Things seem to be hotting up nicely, don’t they? What with the women being ticked off for attempted scene-stealing, the ‘angel’s’ wife being referred to as a silly moo, and Jonathan punching Rinkley in the stomach and making him sick, I should say that this *Dream* is hardly as Shakespeare intended it, and that Thalia, up there on Mount Olympus, or Parnassus, or wherever she is, must be finding this a better comedy than the one The Bard wrote. All the same, though, I don’t like the sound of that man Rinkley. What he did with Rosamund seems harmless enough, although, as Jonathan pointed out to him, he should have desisted when asked, but to label a man a molester of children isn’t very pretty, is it? I wonder the Yorkes put him up when they had a nine-year-old girl in the house.”

“I think the epithet may have referred to an incident in Rinkley’s past; one that he had hoped was either unknown to the company or forgotten by them. That it was not, may have given him the shock which made him vomit.”

“Anyway, I’m glad Jonathan punched him in the stomach.”

“In the interests of the play it may have been better to punch him there, rather than to have given him a black eye or a broken nose or jaw. Jonathan is the most belligerent of all my relatives. I hoped Deborah would have tamed him by now,” said Dame Beatrice.

“I expect she has, except when she herself is involved,” said Laura. “It was because he’d laughed at *Deborah* that he got the punch in the stomach.”

Chapter 4

Retractable Blade

“... we will do no harm with our swords.”



You know, old boy,” said Rinkley to Brian Yorke, “that last scene needs all the aid it can get.”

“How can you say that, when it’s got yours?” asked Donald Bourton unpleasantly.

“No need to be sarky, old boy. I wasn’t meaning myself, but the supporting cast.”

“Meaning *me*, I suppose,” said Susan Hythe. “It might help if you didn’t breathe whisky fumes into my face through the supposed chink in the wall.”

“Not whisky fumes; the ardour of love, dear.”

“We’re all doing our best for you,” said Caroline Frome. “Nobody can make Wall really funny, so it isn’t my fault if I can’t get laughs.”

“You need not try to stick your finger in my eye when you make the chink. It’s wasted, anyway. The audience won’t spot it from the distance they’ll be away from us. As for Robina alternately dropping her dog and her lantern when she’s doing Moonshine, it’s abysmal.”

“Thanks very much!” said Robina Lester. “I’m only trying to back up your own feeble efforts to be funny.”

“The parts in the workmen’s play are meant to be crudely acted,” said her son David, who was Lion.

“Let’s take it through once more,” said Brian Yorke, “and, Susan darling, you fall *across* Pyramus when you kill yourself. You don’t just lie down in a graceful manner two yards away from him.”

“I should prefer to be further off still,” said Susan.

“And *I* don’t want that Two-Ton Tessie knocking all the breath out of me,” said Rinkley. “I’ve got a tender stomach.”

“As Mr Bradley found out, bless his heart,” said Robina viciously.

“Anyway, I’ve got a much better idea for that bit,” said Rinkley, ignoring her.

“When Thisbe comes in and finds I’ve stabbed myself—incidentally, when are ‘props’ going to produce that sword? We need practice with it.”

“It will be available from tomorrow, I think. It won’t actually be a sword, but a dagger with a retractable blade,” said Marcus Lynn. “It’s very realistic, but quite harmless, of course. It’s a nice-looking thing, an exact replica of a sixteenth-century stiletto.”

“But do we want anything realistic in that particular scene?” asked Susan Hythe. “I thought it had to be completely farcical. What’s wrong with sticking the sword under our armpits? That’s the way it’s always done, I thought.”

“The audience like to see the dagger actually sticking in someone’s chest,” said David Lester.

“Yes, in tragedy plays, but not in comedy.”

“Well, anyway, I hope we can soon have the ‘props’ to practise with,” said Rinkley. “The costumes are one thing, but the ‘props’ are quite another.”

“There is the same objection to handing out either,” said Yorke, “before at least the last rehearsal but one. People play about with them and lose them or damage them. Marcus is spending a lot of money on the show as it is. We can’t let him in for replacements. Look, darlings, let’s just try the scene again, shall we?”

“We could do with a bit more sparkle from the court party,” said Rinkley. “Perhaps, Brian, you could suggest that their interjections as they watch our bucolic antics are supposed to be a facetious bandying of wit, not a serious criticism of our efforts.”

“Don’t he talk lovely!” said Tom Woolidge. “You leave it to Brian to instruct us, if you don’t mind, Rinkley. We want a balanced performance, not a one-man band consisting of you.”

“Sorry! Sorry! No intention of hurting your tender feelings. To go back to what I wanted to say, what about trying out a bit of business I thought up for where Thisbe comes in and finds me dead? You know the bit where she says, ‘A tomb must cover thy sweet eyes’—”

“I wish it would!” muttered Susan Hythe.

“—well, I think it would be much funnier if she paused at that point and Quince and Lion came on with a stretcher and carried me off on it before she finished the speech and killed herself.”

“But how would I do it if the dagger was still sticking in your chest?” asked Susan.

“Oh, good Lord! You’d have pulled it out, of course, the way we’ve

rehearsed it without the dagger.” He turned to Yorke. “*Now* you see what I mean about having the ‘props’. This dumb young cluck hasn’t visualised the scene at all.”

“How can I visualise this change you’re suggesting, when we haven’t even tried it out?” demanded Susan angrily.

“So Quince and Lion pretend to stagger under my weight—” went on Rinkley, ignoring her as before.

“It wouldn’t be pretence,” murmured David.

“—and make a nice bit of business for themselves. We’ve *got* to get laughs somehow.”

“That’s all very well, but haven’t you forgotten that after Pyramus has stabbed himself and is supposed to be lying dead on the stage, he suddenly sits up and corrects something Theseus has said? That is what gets the laughs. It’s quite the funniest moment in the scene. It doesn’t need any embroidering. Besides, it’s been classic stuff ever since Aristophanes invented it,” said the director.

“So the Greeks had a word for it, had they?”

“As for most things. In *The Frogs* it comes when the corpse which is being carried down to the river Styx suddenly sits up and starts belly-aching about the two obols which have to be paid to the ferryman. It’s become a stock comedy situation and you must exploit it to the full.”

“If it’s as ‘stock’ as all that, it’s time it was improved upon a bit. Listen here: after I’m supposed to be dead, Thisbe comes in and finds me and makes her oration. Right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Ending with: ‘So farewell, friends. Thus Thisbe ends. Adieu, adieu, adieu.’ ”

“Quite correct. And then she stabs herself with the dagger she pulls out of your body.”

“Then Theseus and Demetrius make their feeble little wisecracks—”

“And that’s your cue to sit up and correct them.”

“No. I’ve got a far better idea. When I die, Thisbe comes in and finds me. Well, now, instead of making her moan all in one speech, I want it cut at ‘a tomb must cover thy sweet eyes’, as I said. That’s the cue for Prologue and Lion, the only two men available, to come in with a stretcher and carry me off. Then Thisbe finishes the speech and, instead of my sitting up and correcting the court lot, I come rushing back on stage to do it, pursued by Prologue and he by the

lion. What's wrong with that?"

"It's never done that way."

"I don't call that much of an argument. Ideas change."

"There's no exit line for Pyramus. Thisbe makes her speech either standing or kneeling beside the body, and then she pulls out the dagger and—"

"Well, at least let's try it my way and see how it goes."

"It's not a bad idea," said David Lester. "Gives me a bit more roaring to do and people do like to see somebody chasing somebody else. Look at all those car chases on TV. But instead of Quince as Prologue chasing Pyramus back on stage, I think he ought to come straight back after we've carried Pyramus off, or else he'll be too puffed out to say that bit about a burgomask dance between two of our company. Then *I* chase Pyramus back on."

"I don't get puffed out by running a dozen yards across a lawn," said Marcus Lynn indignantly. "I do my morning jogging like anybody else."

"Sorry, sir. No offence," said young David Lester. "I'll tell you another thing which always goes down well. Remember Robertson Hare and his trousers? Well, how would it be if, as he runs, Pyramus drops his Greek tunic and displays broadly-striped short pants? Bound to raise mirth. Always does."

"Especially if you could manage to get a hefty kick at the pants," said Robina Lester nastily. Rinkley looked at her evilly, but said nothing.

"Well, that's everything set up for the dress rehearsal, Jon," said Brian Yorke some weeks later. "Hope you haven't been too fussed with having the lighting and amplifier experts all over the place, and the noise, and all that."

"Not a bit," replied Jonathan. "As you know, Valerie very kindly took the kids off our hands while all the work was going on. We thought Rinkley would still be with you, but she phoned to say he had gone and that Yolanda was looking forward to having our two to play with."

"Did Valerie tell you why Rinkley left our house?"

"No."

"I had to kick him out. He made himself a nuisance. Got far too familiar with our kid. Nothing really wrong, you know, but I didn't like it. He may be a very good actor, but I'll see to it that he doesn't get a part in our next production. Talk about abusing my hospitality! Anyhow, he knows what I think of him, and I expect he'll watch his step from now on. One thing: we can trust the signora to keep an eye on the small fry. She's a veritable dragon."

"Rinkley needs a damn good hiding and he'll get it if there's any nonsense so far as I and mine are concerned. He doesn't seem to be the only menace, though.

Deb told me that Susan and Caroline have both had trouble with Bourton in that wood of ours. They are not in any of his scenes, but sometimes he's off stage when they are. Add the time of evening and the pale moonlight and I suppose his sap rises and his hormones begin to function. Deb has the feeling that the girls were flattered at first and let him get away with situations which afterwards they regretted. They both hate his guts now."

"Oh, well, Robina Lester is in that squad, and young David Lester hovers between Caroline and Susan, I think, so that should take care of things. There's no real harm in Donald. He's not like Rinkley."

"Well," said Jonathan, deciding to change the subject as he looked down towards the bay, for he and Yorke were standing on the top terrace, "everything seems to be in order. We are quite ready except for the chairs for the audience, and I'm told they're coming tomorrow morning."

"You have to hand it to Lynn. He *said* everything would be ready in time for the dress rehearsal and everything is ready, as you say."

"That's the beauty of having a business tycoon in charge of the arrangements, I suppose."

"He's done us proud in the matter of costumes, too. No expense spared and everybody delighted—and that's a miracle in itself. He's behaved like a gentleman and toggled up the other girls as handsomely as he has his wife. How do you like your own outfit?"

"I hardly know myself in it. It was a great idea to have the court party in Elizabethan costume and the workmen in Greek tunics and sandals. As for the fairy costumes, they are out of this world."

"Well, they would be, wouldn't they?" said Deborah, joining them on the terrace. "Is the weather going to hold up?"

"I do hope so, but it's plaguey hot. Could end in a thunderstorm, I suppose."

"Not in June," said Jonathan confidently.

"We'll keep our fingers crossed. What a self-possessed young damsel your little Rosamund is. She really makes something special of that little scene with Puck."

"We're lucky with that young Peter Woolidge. Not only is he marvellous in the scene with Rosamund, but his acrobatics, swinging on branches and so forth, are most spectacular."

"Well, he's a trained gymnast, you know."

"How did your daughter take it when she knew you had changed her part?"

"Yolanda? Absolutely delighted. She said, 'So now I can wear boys' clothes

and ride a pony'. I said no to the pony. I told her that the hunting-party were to come in on foot but that she would be leading a couple of bloodhounds. She was more than satisfied with that and now that she's tried on her doublet and hose she's in the seventh heaven. Have the 'props' turned up, do you know?"

"All locked away in a cupboard—swords and things and, of course, the Pyramus and Thisbe retractable dagger—and Lynn has the only key. The dagger is marvellous. Out of curiosity I tried it, first on the cellar door—I was born with a big bump of caution!—and then on myself with Lynn and his boy watching. I must say it works like a charm and really stays put. Most realistic and convincing."

"Lynn had it specially made by a theatrical expert. Goodness knows what this production must have cost him."

"Well, he's made one gain out of it. Emma is a different woman since the first read-through. She absolutely blossoms now."

"Thanks to Deborah's coaching!"

"Oh, nonsense," said Deborah. "She only needed a bit of encouragement."

As, in Brian Yorke's experience, a dress rehearsal always takes at least twice as long as the actual performance, the cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had been told to arrive not a minute later than six o'clock. The rehearsal was held on a Tuesday. This was so that on the Wednesday all that had gone wrong (and its name, thought Brian resignedly, would undoubtedly be legion) could be put right before the first public performance on the Thursday.

Marcus Lynn had engaged his own experts and came along with them at three in the afternoon to make a final test of the lighting and the sound. Deborah gave them tea at half-past four and at five Valerie Yorke brought back Rosamund and Edmund, accompanied by Ganymede and Lucien. Signora Moretti brought her dancing class, too, for the children were to be rehearsed first so that they could be in bed at a reasonable time.

Nobody made any objection to this arrangement. Young Peter Woolidge good-naturedly turned up early, having begged time off work, and played his little scene with Rosamund and, as Deborah was playing Titania, there was no difficulty about rehearsing the four who appeared in her scene with Bottom. Rinkley himself did not appear and it was not absolutely necessary that he should. He would play the scene at its proper place in the play with Deborah speaking the little that the children had to say. When the fairy songs and dances had been rehearsed, the signora would take most of her pupils back to her dance academy where their parents would collect them. Rosamund and Cobweb, Moth

and Mustardseed remained, of course, at the house.

The children had already seen Bottom wearing the ass's head, for Rinkley, as well as they, had had to get used to it. It and Pyramus's dagger were the only 'props' which had appeared at previous rehearsals, so there was no anxiety that at the dress rehearsal or the actual performances there would be any youthful hysteria either of laughter or fear. While the children were rehearsing, the rest of the company put on their costumes. Puck, who wore nothing but a pair of green and brown tights and a becoming cap reminiscent of the horns of a faun, had already assumed these for the scene with Rosamund. Deborah had time to change while the first scene was being played after the dancing-class had departed, and the rehearsal proper began in good time. To Brian Yorke's superstitious horror, it went off without a hitch.

"That's an awfully bad omen," he said to Deborah when, well before eleven o'clock, she was dispensing snacks, cheese and wine to a relaxed and self-congratulatory company.

"Oh, nonsense, Brian," Deborah cheerfully assured him. "See how happy and relaxed everybody is. It's all going to be marvellous."

"Well, I hope so," he said dolefully, "but the dress rehearsal ought to be a complete shambles if the show is to be any good. That is theatrical tradition." At this point the statuesque, flawlessly-proportioned Dr Jeanne-Marie Fitzroy-Delahague, who was there to collect her two little coffee-berries, came up to Brian and said:

"I know of a Hindu baby boy, Sharma Rao. His parents will lend him to be your changeling child. You wish that?"

"Well, we don't *have* to show the changeling child, you know, Doctor. He is referred to, but he doesn't actually need to be among those present," explained Yorke. "Still, it would be marvellous to have him. The only trouble is that he will steal the scene. You know what the professionals say: never play a scene with a child or an animal. I'm sorry for you," he added, turning to Deborah. "First you will get Sharma and then you will get Ganymede, Lucien, Edmund and tiny Sarah, the new Peasblossom. You'll be upstaged the whole blinking time."

"You don't want Narayan Rao should bring Sharma?" asked Jeanne-Marie.

"Good heavens, of course we want Sharma! 'A little Indian boy to be my henchman'," said Donald Bourton, the Oberon, who, with Barbara, had come up to thank Deborah and say goodnight. "We shall love to have him. How old is he?"

"Almost two, and a lovely, fat, heavy boy. You need not hold him in your

arms, he walks well,” said Jeanne-Marie, looking at Deborah’s slim body. “Mr Yorke, you must arrange for one of your actors to collect him from his father who will be seated, with your permission, on the stage at the edge of the woods. You provide them with chairs, please?”

“Of course. Only too glad. Thanks a lot, Dr Delahague. Oh, damn! Oh, damn!” he added softly when Jeanne-Marie, all beaming smiles, had gone with Deborah upstairs to collect her sons. “That’s the sort of complication I’ve been dreading. I knew something like this would happen when the dress-rehearsal went so well. Rao can’t know Rinkley’s in the cast, so what do I say to him?”

“Well,” said Donald Bourton, “can’t you plead the lateness of the hour, the cold night air—that sort of thing—if you want to put Rao off?”

“A highly-educated, sensitive and very intelligent Hindu would see through those sort of reasons before they were out of my mouth. After all, we’ve got other kids in the show who aren’t all that much older than Sharma. Narayan would simply think I didn’t want him and his son—and you know what Indians think about sons, particularly the first-born.”

“What is the trouble about Rinkley?” asked Jonathan.

“A law-suit about a car-accident. Nothing much, but judgment was given against Rao and in Rinkley’s favour.”

“Tell Rao simply and straightforwardly that Rinkley is in the play, then. Make no comment, and leave the rest to Rao. Look here, I know the chap personally, and a very charming fellow he is. Would you like *me* to put it to him?” asked Tom Woolidge.

“I say! Would you?”

“Well, you know, I don’t think Rao would come within a mile of the play if he knew Rinkley was in it,” said Bourton. “If he *did* come, not knowing, and they ran into one another, as they might quite easily do—well, night is night, and woods are woods, and (not to put too fine a point on it) we don’t want murder, instead of two fake suicides, to end the play, do we?”

“It wouldn’t end the play,” said Yorke, with a nervous smile. “It ends with Puck making friends with the audience.”

“Yes, but in Puck’s last speech it says that the midnight owl puts the wretch that lies in woe in remembrance of a tomb. A lot of that last speech is macabre in the extreme.”

“Anyway,” said Yorke, “to talk a different kind of shop, that retractable dagger worked a treat, didn’t it? I know it worked in the other rehearsals, so I betted something would go wrong with it tonight. What did you think of that

scene now it's in costume, Donald?"

"Don't know. I was up here for nature's purposes while that bit was being played. I galloped back only just in time to go on for the ending of the play. How did Rinkley's new bit of business go?"

"I still think it's a mistake, but Lynn, as Quince, seems to like it and what pleases him has to please the rest of us. They bring a stretcher on and plant Pyramus on it. I wonder whether that's rather inartistic. If the scene has to be done their way, I'm sure it would be better to have Quince take the shoulders and Lion the feet, and lug the body off that way."

"Why did they change the scene, anyway?" asked Bourton.

"They both wanted more 'business' attached to that bit. Quince, after that idiotically punctuated speech as Prologue, doesn't get much of a look-in, and, of course, Rinkley dearly likes being put on the stretcher and carried off in stately fashion. He has even contrived to add to the comedy by modestly straightening his tunic as his supposed corpse is being carried off to the sound of the *Dead March* rendered by the Ladies' Orchestra. Then the stretcher also pleases young David Lester. He said he barred taking up Rinkley's legs and having Pyramus's buskins kicking him in the face. Rinkley and Lynn made another small amendment, too."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, in the earlier rehearsals it hadn't crossed my mind or, I'm sure, Rinkley's, that, as Pyramus, he would be wearing body armour and the dagger couldn't be expected to pierce it."

"All part of the fun to pretend it could, I should have thought."

"Well, perhaps, but it seems the dagger itself didn't take to the idea. Rinkley told me that he had experimented by laying the armour on the table and striking it with the dagger, but apparently the thing wouldn't work on metal. It folded back into itself all right, but then, he said, it just fell over. On the wooden table-top it was all right and when he tried it (rather gingerly) on himself without the armour it worked like a charm, and so it did at the dress rehearsal itself, although I've told him to put still more force behind it—or, at least, pretend to."

"So I suppose he came on in the armour and when he found Thisbe's 'mantle good, all stained with blood', he made a great business of divesting himself of the armour before committing suicide."

"Oh, my word, yes. He and Lynn between them made almost an extra scene for themselves and I must say it was quite amusing. Lynn is so pleased with his share in it that I can't very well tell them to cut it shorter."

“Oh, well, if it amuses the audience, I suppose it’s all right to let them get away with it.”

“The play takes quite long enough as it is. We don’t want people slipping away before the end because they have trains to catch or something of that sort. Nothing is more unnerving than to see your audience sneaking off before the end of the show.”

“Not to worry. They won’t. In these days of the ubiquitous automobile, very few people have trains to catch and the local buses don’t run as late as the play does, anyway. Let it rip. If those two can get some fun out of Shakespeare’s clowning, good luck to them, says I.”

“You’ll speak to Narayan Rao, then?”

“Of course I will. In any case, he may have forgiven Rinkley by this time.”

“I doubt it. These motoring cases can be the very devil when a cross-summons is brought. After all, Rao only lost on a technicality. I don’t know the details, but I believe it was touch and go how the verdict went.”

“But it was the court’s decision, not Rinkley’s. Surely Narayan realises that.”

“I don’t suppose it compensates him, any more than it compensated Rinkley in the other case he was involved in, that wretched charge of molesting a child, although he got off.”

“One thing, it doesn’t matter two hoots whether we have a little changeling boy on stage or not. I should think the signora would be thankful not to have another small child to look after, particularly one she doesn’t know.”

“Dr Jeanne-Marie has committed us now, I’m afraid, if Narayan agrees.”

“Oh, well, I’ll speak to Narayan. That will settle it one way or the other. It will be up to him to bring the kid or to opt out.”

“See that you make quite sure to mention Rinkley. But I do wish Dr Jeanne-Marie hadn’t stuck her oar in. I’ve got enough problems without having a race-relations squabble on my hands.”

“Narayan’s case would have had just the same result if Narayan had been an Englishman, you know.”

“I doubt very much whether Narayan sees it quite like that. The ethnic minorities are very sensitive, I believe.”

“Anyway, I’ll talk to him and see how it goes. He’s a nice chap. I don’t suppose he bears Rinkley any real malice.”

“That’s your guess, not mine.”

“What does Marcus think of the play? Has he said anything—made any comments?”

“He seems well satisfied, I think. He has certainly done us proud over the whole production. Your supposedly diamond dewdrop get-up looked fantastic under the lights. Now our only query seems to be the weather. Fate must have something up its sleeve. That dress rehearsal went ever so much too well.”

Chapter 5

All Right on the Night

“And we will do it in action as we will do it before the duke.”



Marcus Lynn was well satisfied with all the arrangements. To his mind, simple in all its workings except where finance and sheer business acumen were concerned, nothing could have been more pleasing than the woodland setting for the production, the splendid (albeit very expensive) designs the theatrical dressmakers had contrived for the costumes, the lighting and sound effects and the few but important theatrical properties which had been provided to augment the swords and daggers he had brought.

More than anything else, he was pleased with his Emma. He was fully aware that unkind opinion was convinced that he had married her for her money and he was honest enough with himself to admit that, to a large extent, this was true. However, the dowry the plain-featured and shy young woman had brought with her had given him the capital he needed in order (in his own words) to get going. It was now, however, but a drop in the ocean of his financial success, and he had paid it back in the form of a trust for her.

Moreover, he had been a kind and most considerate husband and although Emma had not provided him with the child he so desperately longed for, he had never held it against her. Even though medical opinion had informed him that it was not due to any deficiency on his part that no issue had come from the marriage, neither was there any physical reason why Emma should not conceive. After three years of frustration, they had adopted the boy Jasper, the son of a woman cousin of his who had had an affair with what Marcus vaguely referred to as ‘a lord’.

“When I buy stock it’s got to be pedigree,” he said to Emma.

“It’s a poor start for the boy, being illegitimate,” she said.

“We must do our best for him. He’s ten. He’s sure to know he is not our own.”

“Of course, but he also knows his mother is dead. That’s reason enough for us to have taken him on. No need for him to know about the rest of it. I don’t suppose she told him.”

“It will come out at some time or other.”

“Leave things alone,” said Marcus. “Our money will see him through.” This had been seven years ago. On the night of the play he said to her, “Not nervous about the show, are you?—or about Jasper’s performance?”

“Mrs Bradley won’t let me be nervous, and Jasper is used to being in the school plays, so he’ll be all right. Anyway, Barbara Bourton is so outstanding as Hermia that nobody is going to notice little me. I’m not surprised Jasper looks at her and nobody else. He’s completely moonstruck, poor boy.”

“You’ve got better speeches than hers in the opening scene and you say them well.”

“That’s Deborah Bradley’s doing. What I say really ought to be addressed to her, you know, not to Barbara Bourton. ‘Your eyes are lode-stars; and your tongue’s sweet air More tuneable than lark to shepherd’s ear, When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.’ I love those lines, don’t you, Marcus?”

“Oh, well, they’re Shakespeare, of course,” said Marcus, looking at her rather anxiously. “Not getting a ‘thing’ about Deborah Bradley, are you?”

So near midsummer day, the opening scenes of the play took place in daylight, but by the time the fairy scenes came on, so did the lamps among the trees, and effectively enough, although they were seen to greater advantage towards the end, when the wonderful summer night was brilliant with stars.

Dame Beatrice and Laura attended the first performance, for, as Laura pointed out, it was likely to be the best.

“They will all be nervous and on their toes,” she observed, “and will excel themselves in consequence. Nothing like being scared to death to bring out the best in people.”

“A strange philosophy, surely?” said Dame Beatrice.

“I don’t know so much. Look at people in the last war. They were so unexpectedly brave when it really came to the crunch.”

“I wonder how Rosamund will acquit herself this evening?”

“‘So wonder on, till Truth make all things plain’,” quoted Laura. “Not that I have any doubts. Rosamund was born minus nerves and plus the most immortal crust the Lord ever bestowed on a human being. As for Edmund, he will most likely babble everybody’s part as well as his own. They’ll probably have to gag him for the second performance.”

Dame Beatrice had declined an invitation to dine with her relatives, rightly supposing (as Laura put it) that they would have enough on their plates without the added distraction of having to entertain company. Jonathan was disappointed, but Deborah was grateful. She had not only Rosamund and Edmund to calm down and then dress in their fairy costumes, but she also had on her hands the two delightful, ebullient little boys, Ganymede and Lucien, full of fun, laughing and chattering, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, and abounding with what she classified as the joys of spring.

“We are not to be a trouble to you,” Ganymede, aged four, confided to her.

“Maman will demand a full report,” said Lucien, who was six. “Elle dit qu’il faut être très gentil chez vous.”

“Well, so you are. I think you are both beautifully behaved,” said Deborah. “Now, when you are dressed, I would like you to sit and look at picture books and not to race around and get hot and dirty. I have to dress up, too, and so has Mr Bradley, so please help Rosamund to keep an eye on Edmund while Mr Bradley and I are upstairs.”

Jonathan and Deborah had decided, long before the dress-rehearsal, that the summer-house and the conservatory were too inadequate and inconvenient to serve as dressing-rooms for the rest of the cast, so the male actors had been allotted the dining-room and the females the small morning-room. Signora Moretti and her fairies had been given the entrance hall. It had the advantage of having a cloakroom of its own. This was a consideration which mattered a good deal when a dozen excitable children with doubtful control over their bodily functions had to be kept comfortable and free from anxiety.

As the auditorium was a small one, having been fashioned by the previous owner as a setting for private theatricals only, the number of tickets available had had to be limited to one hundred and twenty for each performance. Statistics showed that the first and third nights had been sold out, but that the attendance on the second night had slumped somewhat. This had been anticipated and disappointed nobody.

“The second night of a three-night amateur show is always the dud one,” said Brian Yorke philosophically. “The effervescence of the opening night has worn off and the keyed-up atmosphere of the third night hasn’t arrived. We must try to keep each other up to scratch, that’s all. One thing: Barbara is a professional and won’t let things slide. So long as the rest of us play up to her we shall be all right. Rinkley will pull off the workmen’s scenes and the fairies are a knock-out anyway. Signora Moretti will see to that. Her living depends on it.”

Prevented by Emma's arguments from offering Deborah money or an expensive present, the grateful Marcus had approached Jonathan and suggested a handsome sum for the use of the sylvan and most appropriate setting for the play. Jonathan, who liked him, had laughed and slapped him on the back and had pointed out that he himself was the tenant, not the owner of the property.

"But my cousin gave full permission for the play to be staged here," he said, "and it's made a lot of fun for my wife and me." Although he did not say so, he respected Marcus for choosing a minor part for himself which was well inside his scope instead of opting for a major rôle which, under the circumstances, could hardly have been refused him. As for the 'gate-money', he knew that Lynn had never expected to get back what he had spent on the play, let alone make a profit.

"It's a bit of fun for Emma and the boy and me, too," Marcus said. "I'm glad the boy is in it. Tosses off his lines as Egeus rather well, don't you think?"

"I'm sure Yorke will give him a bigger part next time, when he's got through his A-levels," said Jonathan tactfully. "He has a good stage presence."

"I reckon so. Lad's got the breeding, you know. Son of a lord, even if he *was* born the wrong side of the blanket."

There was to be an interval fairly early on in the play so that the elves and fairies, having danced and sung and, in the case of Peasblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed, said their first little bits of dialogue, could be removed, dressed in their ordinary clothes and claimed by their mothers. From the outset Deborah had insisted that the children's parts were to finish at the end of the first scene in Act Three.

"After all," she said, "their bedtime will be late enough anyway and it is far more important than scratching a donkey's head. As for the fairy procession at the end, well, you will have to do without it. Nobody speaks except Oberon, Titania and Puck, so they will have to carry it on their own."

"In any case," said Emma Lynn, "nobody wants the job of minding little children from the end of the first scene in the third act right to the end of the play. Most of them would be asleep, anyway, or making themselves miserable and cross, poor little things."

There had been a slight contretemps at the dress-rehearsal. It was not nearly enough to dispose of Brian Yorke's superstitions, partly because its real significance, that the stage 'props' were sacred objects, did not appear until later, but mostly because, at the time it occurred, he knew nothing about it.

The two bloodhounds, bred and lent by Tom Woolidge, were not to make

their brief appearance on stage until the hunting-scene in the fourth act. They were tied up outside the summer-house. This was in a little clearing in the woods and had a stoutly-railed verandah to which the dogs were tethered. They were gentle, amenable creatures, their evening meal and bowls of water were placed well within their reach, and no trouble of any kind was expected from them. Even if they bayed, they were far enough from the stage for this to be a matter of no great concern.

Yolanda, in whose charge they were placed when they made their appearance, had always, at rehearsals, been zealous in her care of them. As her scenes were in company with her father and mother, she sat with her parents in the woodland wings on the O.P. side, but paid occasional visits to the summer-house to ensure that all was well with her charges.

At the dress-rehearsal she had been so much entranced with the Elizabethan costumes that she spent most of her time avidly watching the stage and it was not until about the middle of the third act, when she was finding the exchanges between the four lovers excessively boring, that she remembered the bloodhounds and went to visit them. She returned in short order and whispered agitatedly to her mother, "Mummy, the dogs have gone!"

Valerie Yorke drew her daughter further back from the stage and asked, "Darling, what do you mean?"

"I went to see whether they were all right and their leads were there, but they'd gone."

"What about their collars? Have they slipped them?"

"No, their collars had gone, too. There were only the leads left. Anyway, I don't think bloodhounds *can* slip their collars. Oh, Mummy, what shall we do?"

"Don't worry, darling. I think I know where they are. We didn't have Rosamund stay at our house for nothing." She went to Deborah, who was offstage until the opening of the fourth act (from which the fairies had been dispensed) and gave her the news. Deborah's conclusion was the same as her own, so they waylaid Puck as he came off the stage and Deborah said to him:

"These draperies of mine are a bit of a nuisance if I need to run. Could you belt up to the house and bring back the bloodhounds? I am sure my little wretches have collected them."

Young Peter Woolidge bounded away and tore uphill through the woods and up to the house, where he found one of the dogs in bed with Rosamund, the other with Edmund. Before Peter led them back to where they should be, Valerie had followed him and addressed a stern admonition, backed up by threats of

chastisement, to the chief culprit.

“The dogs are ‘props’. Don’t you know better than to meddle with props?” she demanded. “If you ever play about with any other props I’ll spank you hard.”

Rosamund apparently took these words to heart, for the Thursday and Friday performances passed off without a hitch, and Brian Yorke’s presages of disaster vanished and were replaced by a cautious optimism.

Rinkley proved himself not sensitive enough to realise that Bottom’s wood was an enchanted one and that Bottom, no more than Thomas the Rhymer, would never be quite the same man again after his encounter with the Queen of the Fairies. Rinkley had never read lines which, of all the cast, probably only Deborah knew.

‘Harp and carp, Thomas,’ she said;

‘Harp and carp along with me—

But if you dare to kiss my lips,

Sure of your body I shall be.’

‘Betide me weal, betide me woe,

That weird shall never daunt me.’

Syne he has kissed her rosy lips

All underneath the Eildon Tree.’

And so, thought Deborah, had it been with Bottom the Weaver, but there was no magic in Rinkley’s soul. He saw no poetry in the cloddish clown. As Pyramus, however, Rinkley excelled himself. At the first full rehearsal, when, not having been supplied with body-armour, he had pushed the retractable dagger somewhat gingerly against his breast, Yorke was heard to exclaim: “For God’s sake, man, put a jerk in it! You’re killing yourself, not brushing flies off a sleeping Venus!” But that was the only time Rinkley was faulted, so, finding that the dagger could be trusted, Pyramus thereafter tackled his suicide with a will and accomplished a back-fall on to the turf which might have been the pride of a professional tumbler.

“I’ve made a bruise on my chest, thanks to you,” he said to Yorke, after the first full rehearsal. “That dagger hurt me.”

“It was worth it. You were great, old boy, simply magnificent. Keep it up, because that scene is practically the climax of the play.”

Apart from his main task of welding his actors, with their varying talents, into a team, Yorke, as producer as well as director, had had other problems to solve. One was to decide how much scenery was needed in addition to that provided by the garden itself, and the other was how to bridge the distance the

dressing-rooms were from the stage.

His first problem was solved easily and satisfactorily. The woods curved round towards the terrace, so all that was needed was a reversible wooden backdrop on one side of which was painted some Ionian pillars to represent the palace of Theseus and on the other a window in a plain wall to represent Quince's cottage. For the woodland scenes another backdrop was painted with highly stylised trees which almost met the real ones, but leaving the actors with an obvious exit. Both backdrops were mounted on wheels and the scenes were changed, Chinese fashion, in full view of the audience.

The second problem was also easily solved. Except for the donning of his accoutrements by Pyramus, which could be done in the wings, the only necessary changes of costume should have been for Theseus, Hippolyta, Philostrate and Egeus for the hunting-scene, but this also involved a change back again for the last scene of all. Faced with the fact that the dressing-rooms were up at the house, Yorke had compromised. He allowed Philostrate and Egeus no change of costume at all and himself as Theseus a pair of thigh-length boots to wear over his elegant Tudor hose. He gave the only real change of costume to Hippolyta who, for this scene, was to appear as the goddess Artemis with bow and arrow.

For the purpose of this change, he had had a small square tent erected just off the O.P. side of the stage. Screened by the trees were three trestle tables to hold the props. These included the body-armour, helmet and sword-belt complete with retractable dagger worn by Pyramus in the workmen's play and another belt with a dagger from Lynn's collection of weapons. This belt was worn by young Yolanda Yorke in the hunting scene, and only then, so it remained on the trestle table for most of the play. Yorke shed his own sword-belt after the first scene until his re-entrance in the hunting scene, after which he kept it on for the rest of the play, Jonathan and Tom wore their sword-belts throughout the whole action.

To conclude the practical side of producing, Brian arranged that the backdrop, whichever scene it represented, should always be sufficiently far forward to allow the actors to cross the stage out of sight of the audience when this was necessary. This was for the convenience of the workmen and the court party, for these entered sometimes from the prompt side and sometimes from O.P.

"Well, I think we've thought of everything," Brian Yorke had said at the conclusion of the all-too-immaculate dress rehearsal. "I don't want anybody going up to the house except during the interval. Everything needed in the way

of props will be in the wings. You'll have to speed your armour up a bit, Rinkley. The others have only to collect their bits and pieces as Lion, Wall and Moonshine and Thisbe has only to pin a skirt round herself and plonk a wig on her head, but you must get that body-armour on quicker and your sword-belt and helmet, too. Marcus, you could help him a bit couldn't you? As Quince you've nothing to do except pick up your scroll."

"Some fool had moved my armour and belt from where I left them," said Rinkley. "I wish to goodness people wouldn't meddle with my props."

"I moved your armour and helmet and your sword-belt," said Susan Hythe, his Thisbe. "You'd pinched nearly all the trestle table for them and you had pushed Moonshine's dog and my mantle on to the ground, so I put *our* things back on the table and dumped *your* stuff."

"I'll have a table to myself, and then perhaps you meddling moggies will leave my things alone."

"You mustn't mind Rinkley," said Yorke, when his leading man had gone. "That antique shop he and his wife used to run before she kicked him out and divorced him is absolutely booming and, of course, it's hers, inherited from her father, so he's got no claim on the profits and that makes him pretty sore."

"He's overdrawn at the bank," said Robina, whose husband was a bank manager. "I ought not to have let that out, so please forget it, but he is. I daresay that doesn't make him any sweeter."

"He was in trouble some time back over seducing a minor, or so I heard," said Susan when Yorke also had left them. "I would never have agreed to act opposite him if I had known that."

"I heard it, too, but I don't believe there's anything in it, or Brian would never have had him in the play. The Yorkes are nice people, but Valerie is very strait-laced. She didn't want Rinkley in the play, you know, because of that scandal about a child that he was involved in. I don't know any details, but—"

"But I do," said Robina. "However, to give the man his due, the case was thrown out by the magistrates for lack of any real evidence. Well, let's go up to the house and get changed. A Greek tunic and sandals may have been suitable evening wear in Athens, but in England, even in June, they're hardly adequate at this time of night."

"The dress rehearsal went off well, I thought," said Caroline, as the three women, two young and one middle-aged, took the steep path up to the house.

"Brian thinks it went far *too* well," said Robina. "He prophesies disaster at the actual performances. He's not calling a rehearsal for tomorrow. He says he

shall spend the day in prayer. Which of you two is my son walking home tonight?"

The girls giggled and Caroline said she thought it was her turn.

Wednesday passed without incident and the performances on Thursday and Friday went off well, the Thursday performance having been attended by Dame Beatrice and Laura.

"What did you think of the play?" asked Dame Beatrice, as they drove home through the starlit summer night with George, the chauffeur and handyman, at the wheel.

"Better ask George first," said Laura. "He saw it, too. What did you think of it, George?"

"Very well dressed, Mrs Gavin, but the acting a little uneven."

"Yes. I gather that the actress who took Hermia is a pro, or so my neighbour was telling me. Never a good idea to mix the breeds."

"I thought the tall, stooping, bearded youth in that opening scene was miscast as Egeus," said Dame Beatrice, "but I believe he was chosen simply because it is a small part and he is still a schoolboy preparing for important examinations. I thought the sylvan setting was effective."

"But the amplifiers distorted the voices a bit," said Laura. "The costumes were gorgeous, though. Take it for all in all, I thought it was a pretty good effort for a local dramatic society. The Pyramus and Thisbe scene was quite funny, but it's a pity they had to miss out the fairies at the end. Those small fry really were rather scene-stoppers, didn't you think?"

"Delightful children, but it would have been far too late to keep them up, particularly as the play is to run for three nights. I think, too, that the rather self-satisfied man who took Pyramus was glad to see the finish of the play so soon after the conclusion of his own performance. Those overlong speeches by Oberon and Titania were cut to the barest minimum and Puck's closing oration was limited also. Of course one missed 'glimmering light, by the dead and drowsy fire'. I wonder what problems the director and producer had to solve in putting on the play?"

On neither evening did a little changeling boy put in an appearance, although his father had brought him to the dress-rehearsal. A message came on the Thursday to say that the child was suffering from a mild stomach-upset, but that, if it cleared up in time, Narayan Rao would bring Sharma to the third night of the play.

The body-armour which Rinkley donned as Pyramus was rather like a

waistcoat worn back to front. He had to put his arms through the armholes and then Marcus Lynn had to lace him up the back. His helmet was a formidable although a lightweight affair which almost obscured his features, and his sword-belt, with the webbing pocket to hold the weapon, had to be slung over the left shoulder to place the dagger on the wearer's right-hand side. The crimson-coloured belt itself came diagonally across the breastplate and showed up effectively against the bright silver of the armour.

Although at the first full rehearsal Rinkley's handling of the dagger had been the subject of criticism, at the Thursday and Friday performances, assured that the dagger could do him no harm, he had struck himself a convincing blow over the heart. The bit of by-play devised between himself and Marcus Lynn proved not only quite good knockabout farce, but was necessary from a practical point of view, for it had been made clear at the dress-rehearsal that Pyramus, having been laced into his breastplate by Quince behind the scenes, could not get out of it without the other's assistance on stage. He had to get out of it in order to stab himself in a convincing manner, as an earlier demonstration had proved.

"We ought to have been allowed to have the costumes earlier," Yorke had said, "but Lynn wouldn't release them in case we messed them up. He has spent a lot of money on the show, so I can't blame him, but it isn't until the costumes are actually worn on stage that one realises where the snags are going to come."

However, in this instance, both Lynn himself and Rinkley enjoyed inventing an extra bit of 'business' in removing the armour, and the audience seemed to relish the nonsense, too, when Marcus Lynn put up what appeared to be an epic struggle with knots in the laces of the corselet and finished up by putting his knee in the small of Rinkley's back in a pantomime of an early Victorian tirewoman or lady's maid dealing with her employer's refractory pair of stays. This foolery evoked applause as well as laughter when, the recalcitrant fastenings having given way, Rinkley fell flat on his face, a circus trick he had been at some pains to bring off to perfection.

"Well, you see," he said, when Yorke congratulated him on the success of the workmen's play, "in his comedy scenes you've got to *help* Shakespeare a bit, haven't you? Left to himself, the poor chap had no sense of humour at all. Look at all that tiresome Lancelot Gobbo stuff and that rubbish about Malvolio and the cross-garters."

"Well, your improvisations certainly went down well," said Yorke, "but don't overdo them on the last night. There will be the bouquets to be presented to the leading ladies and the mayor is certain to want to say a few words, and Jonathan

and Deborah are laying on a champagne supper for the whole cast up at the house, so nobody wants the play to go on until midnight.”

“Good Lord, neither do I. This open-air stuff is pretty tough on the larynx. I just hope I don’t get one of my quinsies, that’s all.”

Chapter 6

Last Performance

“First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself.”



On Saturday evening the cast assembled in high spirits. It was obvious that the adrenalin was flowing and Brian Yorke had more than a suspicion that in some cases the alcohol had flowed fairly freely, too.

“I think we’re a bit above ourselves,” he said to Jonathan. “I hope the show is going to be all right. It’s not that I give a hoot for the mayor and corporation and all the rest of them, but we’ve done so well the last two nights that it would be a pity to spoil things now.”

“Don’t worry. We’re well-rehearsed. As soon as we open, everything will be all right. Has everybody turned up?”

“Oh, yes, I’ve checked and the signora has counted her chicks and is busy getting them dressed and is screaming at them like a parrot turned sergeant-major. One thing—they’re used to it. That old lady is a tower of strength. I’d back her to control a caravan of camels if she had to teach them to dance.”

“So the mayor and corporation are to honour us.”

“Complete with the mayoress, the president of the golf club, the commodore of the yacht club, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, representatives of the local bench as well as the mayor, and there’s an even chance that the High Sheriff may turn up with the Chairman of Quarter Sessions. The Crossforest M.F.H. is bringing his wife and daughters and a whole bevy of Lynn’s business associates are coming. Emma Lynn is a bit worried in case she lets Marcus down in front of them, but she won’t. Oh, I was asked to tell you that either Dr Fitzroy-Delahague or the gorgeous Jeanne-Marie is going to cut evening surgery and come along before we’ve finished, so that Ganymede and Lucien can be taken home. You and Deborah won’t be sorry, I guess.”

“We shall, as a matter of fact. They’re charming little chaps. One thing: I don’t suppose the evening surgery will be overcrowded. On Saturdays I expect most people find something infinitely better to do than waste a non-working day

in a doctor's waiting-room. It's weekdays—that is to say, work-days—which produce the pitiful patients.”

“Is it a cynic that I see before me? Well, we'd better get changed, I suppose. We're both on in the first scene, worse luck. I like to get the house warmed up a bit before I tread the boards. Talking of which, I do hope Lynn's work-people haven't ruined your lawn.”

“Not mine, thank heaven; my cousin's, and there will be time to smooth things over before he gets back from holiday. In any case, I don't think much damage has been done.”

At this point Deborah appeared.

“I'm doing the children first,” she said. “Then I'll dump them on Signora Moretti and get myself dressed. You had better get a move on, darling, hadn't you? Peter Woolidge is tubbing Lucien and Ganymede, and while he's drying them and dressing them I'll tub Rosamund and Edmund.”

“I'll nip up to my dressing-room and get ready, then, and leave our bedroom all clear for you and the kids. What a help young Peter is. Are the kids behaving themselves?—ours, I mean.”

“Wildly excited, of course. They've caught the general infection. Everybody is excited. By the way, Rosamund has made up her mind that she is to receive a bouquet, so what do we do about that?”

“She'll get one at the end of her scene with Puck. Lynn has laid it all on. I say! I hope the weather cools down a bit. What with the heat and the excitement, we don't want bilious attacks. You know what kids are!”

“Don't worry. Ice-cream and sweets have been taboo since three o'clock this afternoon. When I've done the children I'll push them along to the signora and have a look at you in your costume, shall I?”

“You haven't done that on the other two nights. Why this sudden thusness?”

“I don't know. I've got a funny feeling that I don't want to be far away from you this evening.”

“There's thunder in the air, perhaps.”

“There can't be. The air's as clear as clear. It *is* hot, though. Do skip, darling. We've got to start on time, or nobody will get to bed tonight.”

The evening certainly was warm, but not with the oppressiveness which presages thunder. As Deborah had indicated, there was none of the brooding tension which precedes a coming storm. In fact, as Valerie Yorke said to her husband, it was the kind of beautiful midsummer evening which must have given Shakespeare the urge to write the play.

“Yes,” agreed Brian. “It’s a nuisance we’re on stage as soon as the play opens because, before that, we’ve got to be on hand, with Lynn and Emma and the Bradleys, to receive the Duke of Plaza Toro and suite—i.e. the mayor, mayoress *et al.* I hope to goodness they’ll get here on time. We *must* open at half-past seven if any of the cast are ever going to get home tonight.”

“It’s a pity local notables have to see us in costume before the play begins.”

“Never mind. It can’t be helped. You look stunning and so does everybody else. Even Emma looks beautiful tonight. By the way, I see that Narayan Rao has turned up with his kid. I had better go out there and greet him. It’s all good for race relations.”

Narayan had been given a chair on the O.P. side from which he could get a view of the stage. Sharma was asleep at his feet on a ground-sheet covered by a blanket. He wore a wreath of flowers and looked angelic.

“If he wakes when he is picked up, he will not cry,” said Narayan. “As soon as you have finished with him, I will take him home. My good friend Bourton was anxious that he should appear, but I do not want him to stay up too long.”

“When you’ve taken him home, why don’t you come back and see the rest of the play? There is a seat reserved in the auditorium.”

“Thank you, but I think not.”

The last performance was heralded, as the others had been, by an excerpt from Mendelssohn rendered by the Ladies’ Orchestra, and then on came Theseus and his party to open the play. The first performance had been better than might be expected from amateurs, the second, although sagging a little, had been adequate, but this last performance began by being spectacular and ended in a way which, although the audience did not know it at the time, was sensational.

The opening scene, set against a painted background of Ionian columns which purported to represent the palace of Theseus, went exceptionally well. Brian Yorke, in the snowy tunic, gold sandals and belt, gilded sword and purple cloak of Theseus, looked and sounded like a true duke of Athens, and his wife Valerie made a handsome appearance as Hippolyta, although she had little to say. Their leggy nine-year-old, young Yolanda as Philostrate, made the briefest of appearances, having been sent off early in the scene on being commanded to ‘stir up the Athenian youth to merriments’, and although, at the first rehearsal, she had sneaked back on stage, this had been vetoed and her big moment was when she led in the pedigree bloodhounds (by kind permission of their breeder, Tom Woolidge, who hoped to sell them to Marcus Lynn after the show), so, off-stage, Yolanda spent much of her time with them, especially after their kidnapping by

Rosamund.

Emma Lynn, reassured by the compliments of the High Sheriff at the reception given before the show and by the encouragement she received from her husband and Deborah, spoke Helena's lines with a passion and a confidence which surprised everybody, and when she made her exit on the line, 'To have his sight thither and back again', there was spontaneous applause.

In the workmen's scene which followed, Robina Lester began by reverting to the over-acting which the company hoped had been quashed at rehearsals, but she was soon called to order by receiving a sharp kick on the ankle from Susan Hythe, who was standing next to her. In fact, by the time, in the second act, that Peter Woolidge as Puck had performed his preliminary acrobatics and Rosamund had faultlessly enunciated the fairy's speech, the audience had fallen under the spell of the night, the garden, the woodland setting, and the play itself.

Little Sharma Rao was released into Deborah's charge at the appropriate time and toddled hand-in-hand with her while she delivered her rebellious speech to Oberon. The child, fat, brown and solemn, wore a golden tunic and on his head was a charmingly lop-sided chaplet of yellow flowers. He was on stage for a very short time and then Deborah took him back to his father in the wings. Narayan vacated the chair he had been given and, so far as anybody knew, took the baby boy home as soon as he had dressed him. At any rate, that is what everybody assumed, supposing that anybody thought anything about it at all.

Narayan must have seen Rinkley in the first scene in which the workmen appeared, and Rinkley must have known that Narayan was there because nobody could have been unaware of the presence of the baby boy who so trustingly committed himself to Deborah's care for the short time that he was on stage, but nobody saw or heard any exchange between the two former litigants and it came out later that when Narayan took his child home he certainly did not return to see the rest of the play and could have had no hand in what happened before it ended.

Meanwhile the play romped on and reached the point where Theseus and his train find the lovers asleep in the woods. Young Yolanda, slim and looking tall in her doublet and hose, and permitted, for this one scene, to wear her dagger (one of the prize pieces of Marcus Lynn's collection) proudly led in the dogs. Her father, magnificent boots and all, praised them in the most beautiful description of hounds ever penned:

'My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
So flew'd, so sanded; and their heads are hung

With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
Crook-knee'd and dew-lapp'd like Thessalian bulls;
Slow in pursuit, but match'd in mouth like bells,
Each under each,'

Brian Yorke declaimed thus, while his daughter, determined that on this occasion the dogs should receive their due meed of applause, paraded them across the front of the stage. It was against orders, but to good effect.

What was less effective was the exit of Bottom from the wood. After the huntsmen had been bidden to blow their horns and wake the lovers and these had gone off with Theseus and the rest, Bottom scrambled dizzily to his feet. Awakened and not at all sure of what had been happening to him among the woodland sprites, Rinkley was supposed to have communed with himself, planned to have Quince write a ballad about the amazing dream he thought he had had in the wood, and then crossed the stage to the prompt side ready to come on again when the workmen meet in Quince's house.

Instead of this, as soon as the stage was clear, Rinkley, having got unsteadily to his feet, went off on the O.P. side in the wake of the hunting-party.

To the majority of the audience this deviation from the rehearsed procedure made no difference at all. Even those who were familiar with the full text of the play probably thought that the producer was responsible for the innovation. As for Rinkley himself, he staggered away and when he reached the trestle tables which held the 'props', among the trees, was violently sick.

Yorke, who was taken aback by the actor's unscripted and unrehearsed exit, hastened after him. All questions were obviously unnecessary and Yorke asked only one. "I say," he said, "what's come over you?"

"Those damned mussels. I should never have eaten them." Another indescribable upheaval followed and then Rinkley zigzagged blindly away and lay on a patch of grass shivering and sweating. Yorke went off to look for assistance.

"What is it?" asked Robina Lester, who was picking up her bits and pieces for the workmen's play and had witnessed Rinkley's unrehearsed exit.

"Food poisoning. Dr Jeanne-Marie is in the audience. I'll stay with him if you'll go and get her. Be as quick as you can."

Deborah came up. Yorke said, "I don't think he can go on again tonight. Go in front and beg the indulgence of the audience for a few minutes, would you, while we get the understudy changed and briefed?"

"Mussels?" said Dr Jeanne-Marie. "He had better go to hospital, although it

seems there can be little left in his stomach. He may have an allergy to shellfish, but one thinks also of myelotoxin, so to get the stomach washed out is precautionary.” Some of the men carried the sweating, trembling, mottled Rinkley up the slope to the house, ready for the ambulance to pick him up, using the stretcher which was in readiness for carrying Pyramus off the stage in the workmen’s play. While, accompanied by Deborah, who was not needed again until the very end of the show, and Dr Jeanne-Marie who was to do the telephoning, the bearers carried the feebly protesting man up through the woods, Brian Yorke went to find Donald Bourton and urge him to change as quickly as he could from the Fairy King’s fantastic trappings into the tunic and armour of Pyramus.

He found his Oberon in a little clearing, but was perturbed to note a half-empty bottle of whisky at Bourton’s side and Bourton seated on the ground.

“Here!” he said urgently. “On your feet, Don, and make it slippy.”

“Ur?”

“Rinkley has passed out on us. Get into the Pyramus outfit. You’ll have to stand in.”

“Can’t. Got to go on again as Oberon.” He was slightly glassy-eyed, but his speech was clear and when he rose to his feet he was quite steady.

“Never mind about Oberon. Look, I’m cutting out the little scene where Bottom turns up again at Quince’s house and I’ve told the scene-shifters to put on the palace back-drop. We’ll go straight into the workmen’s play.”

As he talked he had Bourton by the arm and was urging him towards the table on which the armour, sword-belt and helmet were laid out. An anxious Marcus Lynn was standing there and received their advent with relief.

“Oh, good man, Donald!” he said. “Come on. I’ll help you.”

“And I’ll go in front again and hold the audience for another few minutes,” said Yorke.

To release the men who had carried Rinkley up to the house and who were needed in the next scene, Deborah remained with the patient until the ambulance came for him and so she missed the extraordinary conclusion of the third night of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. As the play, in view of Rinkley’s retirement and the necessity to put on Bourton as his understudy, was to conclude with the burgomask dance, leaving out the fairy ending except for Puck’s last lines, she would not be required on stage again, for there was no time for Bourton to change back again from Pyramus to Oberon.

With him in Rinkley’s part, the workmen’s scene went even better than it had

done at the two previous performances, and he, whether influenced or not by the whisky, appeared to be enjoying himself. The interruptions, essays of wit, ripostes and responses from the court party, sparkled and crackled as they had never done before. Then came the point at which Pyramus, believing that the lion had killed Thisbe and carried her off, decides to commit suicide.

Pyramus usually stands up to make his farewell speech before stabbing himself and falling to the ground, and Rinkley had played it this way. He did a particularly good theatrical fall and liked to show it off to the audience. Bourton changed this. He lay down with great care and a meticulous arrangement of his tunic after Quince had helped him to get out of his body-armour, and then, having declaimed that he was dead, fled and that his soul was in the sky, he raised himself slightly on one elbow, gave an unexpected hiccup, raised the dagger and plunged it into his body. Picking up her cue, Susan Hythe, as Thisbe, capered on to the centre of the stage and gazed concernedly down on him.

“ ‘What, dead, my dove?’ ” she enquired, and continued: “ ‘O Pyramus, arise! Speak, speak. Quite dumb? Dead, dead? A tomb must cover thy sweet eyes.’ ”

This was almost the cue for Quince and Lion to come in with their stretcher (which had been returned) and convey Pyramus into the wings, but before this happened Thisbe was supposed to pull out the dagger so that at the end of her speech she could commit suicide with it.

This she failed to do because the dagger remained stuck fast. The audience thought that this was all part of the fun, but Susan signalled to the pall-bearers to come on, and the rigid body of Pyramus was carried off with the dagger still fixed in position. Susan turned her back on the audience and mouthed at Yorke, who was looking truly ducal as Theseus, “No dagger! It won’t come unstuck. What shall I do?”

“Drop dead,” he said, in a voice the audience could hear. There was a roar of appreciative laughter at this unscripted *addendum*, and Thisbe, clutching her heart, dropped slowly, gracefully and without hurting herself, on to the turf. Quince, without Lion, came galloping back. He went up to Theseus and muttered, “Something’s happened. He can’t come on again. Passed out.”

“Oh, damn! We must play on, though. Do the dance,” said Yorke, “and we’ll finish.”

“Right,” said Marcus Lynn. “ ‘Will it please you to see the epilogue?’ ” he demanded loudly, “ ‘or to hear a burgomask dance between two of our company?’ ”

“ ‘No epilogue, but come, your burgomask,’ ” shouted Yorke, hoping that this truncated speech would indicate to the ladies of the orchestra that he had decided to cut the play short at this point. To make certain, however, that they would get the message, he murmured a word to Jonathan, who, as Demetrius, was standing behind him, and Jonathan slipped out. The orchestra produced some music from *Capriole Suite*, Quince and Lion performed their clodhoppers’ dance and, when this was over, they and the rest of the workmen retired into the wings. Theseus spoke the lines which took the court party off the stage and there was only a short pause (which, anyway, was covered by applause from the audience) before Puck came on and spoke the last few lines of the play.

When the bouquets to Valerie Yorke, Barbara Bourton, Emma Lynn and Deborah had been presented and, with some difficulty, the mayor had been prevented from making his threatened speech, Marcus Lynn alone saw the notables off as the audience drifted out. There was much revving-up of cars, Lynn’s business friends departed and then an appalled producer had to give the cast the news. The totally unexpected collapse of Donald Bourton which had prevented his return on stage was not due to drink or to natural causes. By some so-far unexplained mischance, he had been given the wrong dagger and, all-unwittingly, had stabbed himself to death with it.

Chapter 7

Bare Bodkin

“Ah, me, for pity!—what a dream was here!”



It was well after midnight before the actors were able to leave, but all was over at last and the body removed to the mortuary. Deborah offered Barbara Bourton a bed, but she, calm and poised as ever, politely declined the offer. Her sister and her sister's husband, she said, had been in the audience and would still be waiting to drive her home.

“Are they staying with you?” Deborah asked.

“Oh, yes. Please don't worry. I shall be all right.” So Deborah let her go and walked up to the house with Jonathan. At last they were alone and in their own drawing-room. Jonathan opened one of the bottles of champagne which had been destined for the celebrations and, having poured out two glassfuls, sat down and stared at the electric fire which, finding Deborah shivering, he had switched on.

“But how *could* the wrong dagger have got into that sword-belt?” she asked.

“Very easily,” he replied. “It almost happened when I was in College, although the circumstances were not quite the same. We were doing *Hamlet* and some of the chaps were fooling about in the dressing-room and somebody picked up the wrong dagger and went lunging about with it, thinking it was a harmless one. Luckily somebody caught his arm before he could do any damage, otherwise we might have had just the same sort of horrible accident as we've had here tonight. People really should be more careful, even with theatrical properties they think are safe to handle.”

“I suppose it *was* an accident?” said Deborah.

“An accident? What else could it have been?”

“I don't like accidents which kill people.”

“Who does? But they happen every day.”

“Yes, crashed cars and falls and burns in people's homes and old people and young children knocked down crossing the street, but this was quite different and it could only have happened to Donald.”

“How do you mean?”

“If Rinkley had not been taken ill, Donald would not have played Pyramus.”

“So?”

“Well, don’t you think that the minute Rinkley drew it out, he would have known it was the wrong dagger? Don’t you remember how nervous he was about the right one until he had convinced himself it was harmless? He had used it at rehearsals, remember. There’s such a thing as the kinaesthetic sense, you know, in all of us. The very first feel of the dagger as he handled it would have warned him. He would never have risked using it on himself. I suppose there will have to be an enquiry to find out what led to the daggers being changed, and we shall have the police and the reporters and goodness knows what number of gaping sightseers. Oh, God! What an ending to the play!”

“Yes. Well, that can’t be helped. Naturally there will have to be an official enquiry, even although the death was accidental.”

“Are you trying to convince yourself that it was? Quite a number of people may not have liked Donald, you know.”

“I was one of them. He was far too forthcoming with you to meet with my approval.”

“And he was a lot more forthcoming with some people than ever he was with me. And, although I wouldn’t say this to anybody but you, his Barbara wasn’t altogether overwhelmed by his sudden death, you know.”

“Suffering from shock, but the whole realisation of what happened hadn’t hit her.”

“That could be so. Very well, I’ll be charitable. Drink up and let’s go to bed. There will be plenty to do tomorrow and the next day. For one thing, Marcus Lynn’s workmen will be here on Monday to dismantle the set-up and take away the amplifiers and the lights and the painted scenery. Oh, and I expect someone will come along tomorrow to collect Ganymede and Lucien. Jeanne-Marie let them sleep on instead of waking them and taking them home.”

This someone turned out to be Dr Jeanne-Marie herself. She did not work on Sundays, she explained, except to answer emergency calls. She accepted a drink and came out with a direct reference to the tragedy of the previous evening.

“That was a very bad thing,” she said. “Is there any chance, do you think, that one of the small children who were in the play—I am thinking of the little boys rather than of the little girls—that one of them could have been playing with the weapons, probably before the performance began?”

“It took a little girl to sneak the bloodhounds away, so children *can* get at the

props,” said Deborah.

“So I am right about the children?”

“Not a chance,” said Jonathan. “At the dress-rehearsal we had a bit of trouble, but of a very different kind. Supervision was not very strict and our two, Rosamund and Edmund, contrived to purloin the two bloodhounds and take them to bed. They were severely scolded—I put Rosamund as the organiser of the enterprise—and Signora Moretti was asked to keep a particularly vigilant eye on her charges during the actual performances.”

“Nobody would manage to elude that old lady, as I think you will agree,” said Deborah. “Besides, the properties were not put out until the children were being dressed up. I know that for a fact, and once the performance started there were always people in the wings. No child could have got away with touching anything on the props tables.”

“What must have happened, I think,” said Jonathan, “was that either Yorke or one of the Lynns, who carried the things down and laid them out on the tables, dropped the daggers out of the belts quite by accident and put the wrong dagger into the belt meant for Pyramus. There were four daggers and two swords. Yorke had a sword and, as Oberon, Bourton had one, but the swords don’t come into it. I myself had a dagger, so had Tom Woolidge. We found them less troublesome than swords. Then young Yolanda Yorke as Philostrate carried one in her belt, but only in the hunting scene and, even then, hers was only a very short *sgian dhu*, the little knife Highlanders carry stuck into their stockings, not the one she was first given.”

“The blade which killed Mr Bourton was six inches long. I was present when the police surgeon took it out,” said Dr Jeanne-Marie.

“What I don’t understand,” said Jonathan, “is how those two fellows, Lynn and young David Lester, who dumped Bourton on that stretcher and carried him off-stage, did not see that there was something very seriously wrong with him.”

“There was nothing to see except the hilt of the dagger protruding from his body.”

“Blood, surely?”

“No. The only person who might have suspected something was the girl who found that she could not immediately pull the weapon out.”

“But I thought stab wounds bled like the very dickens, Doctor.”

“It depends in what part of the body the wound is made. In this case the most that would be noticed would be some blood from the nose and the mouth, but this could be attributed by a non-medical person to the patient’s having had a

nose-bleed. Actually, there was not even this symptom on Mr Bourton when we examined him, neither should I have expected it.”

“But poor Donald died of the wound!” exclaimed Deborah. “Could you explain what you mean, Doctor?”

“Why not? It will come out at the inquest. It depends on the position the body is in when the blow is struck. I was in the front row of the audience and saw what happened. Of course, until I was called to the side of the stage, I had no idea that the weapon was anything but a theatrical toy, although I did think that Mr Bourton was a very good actor. To stab himself he first raised his head and shoulders a little off the ground, but not enough to make any real difference to the prone position in which he had been lying, then he stabbed himself and fell flat again. He would have lost consciousness immediately and was dead by the time Mr Lynn and young Mr Lester had carried him off the stage, but there was no outward sign of bleeding.”

“Lord, yes,” said Jonathan. “I read about it in Professor Keith Simpson’s autobiography. What poor Bourton gave himself when the dagger went in was an internal haemorrhage. The blade must have gone in between two ribs and may not have pierced the lung. The blood would have seeped into the cavity of the chest and there might have been no outward sign at all except the hilt of the dagger sticking out of him.”

When Dr Jeanne-Marie had collected her sons, and Rosamund and Edmund had been sent to play in the garden, Marcus Lynn called to confirm that his demolition squad would be coming next day and, under the eye of their employer, would make short work of the clearing up. Marcus stayed for sherry. He was gloomy.

“That was one hell of an ending to the show,” he said. “I’ve been to the hospital and it seems it was simply one of those things. If the poor chap had struck on a rib instead of the dagger going between two of them, there might have been some chance of saving him. As it was, there was no hope at all. Emma is terribly distressed and I suppose there will be every sort of a hoocha about how the daggers got changed over.”

“That reminds me,” said Jonathan. “Is it known what happened to the theatrical dagger?”

“Oh, yes. It was the first thing I thought of when it was obvious that the poor chap was dead, so when Yorke and I gathered up the properties after the police surgeon had authorised the removal of Bourton’s body, I checked, with Yorke standing by. The retractable dagger must have slid out of the belt as the props

were placed on the tables. I can't think why none of the three of us noticed—Jasper helped Yorke and myself to carry the stuff down—but, of course, the lights were not put on until the performance began. Anyway, the dagger had got kicked under the table and all I can think is that some well-meaning busybody (who, of course, will never own up to it now) noticed that the belt was empty and shoved a dagger into it.”

“The one and only objection to that theory,” said Deborah, “is that whoever did it must have been able to lay his hands on another dagger, unless he had brought one with him and the whole thing was done out of malice aforethought.”

“In which case the dagger couldn't have been meant for Bourton, but for Rinkley,” said Jonathan, “but all this is idle speculation. All the real evidence will come out at the inquest. Have you spoken to any of the others, Marcus?”

“No. I think better not. It will be better to leave all that to the police. No blame can attach itself to anyone. Nobody could possibly have known that Rinkley would have been taken ill and an understudy put on, and if Rinkley had accidentally got the wrong dagger, he would have known as soon as he drew it out.”

“Or perhaps even before that, because of the weight of the thing when he slung the belt over his shoulder,” said Deborah. Later she added to her husband, “I'd like to get Rosamund and Edmund out from here for a bit, away from all the publicity. There won't only be the police. There will be the reporters and the sightseers, as I said before.”

“I don't think you need worry. The death will be declared accidental and the papers won't give it more than a mention, if that. Besides, where should we put the kids? Everybody must have had a bucketful of minding them by now.”

“Try Aunt Adela and Laura. They only had them for a week instead of the promised fortnight. A week will see us in the clear, I should think.”

So Deborah telephoned the Stone House which was on the edge of the New Forest and contacted Laura.

“Deborah here.”

“Hullo. How did the last night go?”

“That's why I'm phoning. I'd rather tell you about it when we meet. A dreadful thing happened and I want the children out of here for a day or two. Could you possibly have them again while we get things sorted out?”

“I'll ask the boss, but I'm sure we can. Are you and Jonathan all right?”

“Oh, yes, perfectly all right, the children, too.”

“Good show! Hang on while I contact the fountain-head.” Laura was back on

the telephone in less than a minute with an assurance that Dame Beatrice would be delighted to have the children again. "She says would it help if we came over and fetched them? She thinks you may be in a bit of a spot. *Would* it help?"

"Oh, Laura, it most certainly would! Could you make it quite soon? I want them out of the house before all the fun begins."

"The fun being what?—or mustn't I ask until we meet?"

"The police, we think, and the reporters, will be here."

"We'll be right over." Laura was as good as her word and her arrival with Dame Beatrice coincided with that of the police. While Jonathan was interviewed by them, Deborah presented the children. They were ready to leave, Rosamund clutching the Victorian posy which she had been given for her performance and from which she refused to be parted, Edmund with the dog-collar Peter Woolidge had begged from Tom to give him.

"It's awfully good of you to take them off our hands," said Deborah to Dame Beatrice, leading her relative by marriage out of earshot while Laura was coping with an enthusiastic account of the play from the children. "We had a serious accident here on the last night, and there will have to be an inquest and the children will be far better out of the way."

"What happened?"

"There was a mix-up of props and the stand-in who was playing Pyramus picked up the wrong dagger and stabbed himself to death. Jon says it's the sort of accident which can easily happen, but in this case I don't think that's true."

"How would it be if we sent the children off with Laura and I stayed to hear the details of the story? I was present at the first performance of the play, as you know, so I shall have no difficulty in following your account of what occurred."

"Oh, if you *would* stay and help us out, it would be a tremendous relief to me."

"So what happened exactly?" asked Dame Beatrice again when Laura had gone off with the children.

"Mr Rinkley, the man who played Bottom the Weaver, was taken ill about three-quarters through the play and was rushed to hospital with suspected food poisoning. I must ring them and find out how he is."

"So the understudy took his place—"

"Well, we don't have understudies the way the professionals do. We have to find somebody else in the cast who can fill in, and in this case it had to be Donald Bourton. He was playing Oberon and was off-stage when Rinkley collapsed, so he was free to play in the Pyramus and Thisbe scene."

“But surely Oberon comes on again at the end of that scene?”

“Yes, but we cut the fairy ending. As it was, we were running late, so nobody minded. We wouldn’t have had the fairies, anyway, because the children were all in bed or asleep on their parents’ laps in the auditorium, so the scene would have lost a lot of its attraction, anyway.”

“Yes, I noticed the absence of the fairies at the end of the performance I attended. So you had to substitute Mr Bourton for Mr Rinkley.”

“Yes. What happened after that is still a mystery, but perhaps the inquest will clear it up. Well, actually, of course, we know what happened, but we don’t know how such a mistake could have been made. You remember that Pyramus is supposed to stab himself? Well, in some extraordinary way the daggers got mixed up. Instead of using the retractable thing which had been provided, and which was harmless, poor Donald pulled a *real* dagger out. Where it came from and how it got into the pocket in the sword-belt is an absolute mystery. Somebody put it there, but I doubt whether there is going to be any owning-up.”

“Could any of the children—there were a dozen or more in the fairy scenes, I noticed—have had access to the properties and played with them?”

“Well,” said Deborah, “of course I’ve thought of that, but, honestly, I don’t believe it’s the answer. Yolanda Yorke, the eldest of the children—she took Philostrate—was with her parents all the time except when she went to the summerhouse to see that the bloodhounds were all right, but the summerhouse is in a clearing in the woods and quite a long way from the tables on which the props and things were laid out.”

“But she was not under her parents’ eye the whole time.”

“I’m sure Yolanda wouldn’t have meddled with anybody else’s things. She is a most serious, responsible little girl, although she is only nine. In any case, as I say, I can’t see that she would have had the opportunity. There were people in the wings all the time.”

“And the younger children?”

“Oh, dear!” In spite of the gravity of the situation, Deborah laughed. “If they could have escaped from Signora Moretti’s eagle eye I should be the most surprised woman in Europe. She assumed complete charge of them. They had cushions they were made to sit on and no chance whatever to escape her vigilance. She had a couple of mothers to help out, and young Peter Woolidge, who was Puck and a wizard with children, was there, whenever he was off stage, keeping them amused and happy.”

“And were Rosamund and Edmund under the same surveillance as the rest?”

“You bet they were, and Ganymede and Lucien, too. When they and the other fairies were not on stage they were all under the very strictest supervision. It’s impossible that they could have tampered with anything on the actual nights of the play.”

“And before the play?”

“All the properties and costumes were locked away and Jon gave the key of the room to Marcus Lynn. When they were taken out, instead of being distributed to the cast in the dressing-rooms, they were put out on the trestle tables at the side of the stage so that they could be picked up by the actors as and when they were needed. It was thought better to keep all the props together until people had to use them. There was just time, you see, for Pyramus to get into his armour and Thisbe her skirt and Wall to hitch on the cardboard fore-and-aft thing representing the lime and roughcast, and all Moonshine had to do was to pick up her lantern, dog and bush of thorns, and Lion only needed to assume the tatty bit of synthetic fur complete with lion’s-head cap. This was all done while the court party were discussing what their evening entertainment was to be.”

“It sounds as though the daggers were changed over before the play began. So far as I remember, there was no point during the actual scenes when only one person was off the stage and so in a position to have sole access to the properties, was there?”

“I can’t think of one. When the court party was ‘on’ at the beginning, the fairies and the workmen were ‘off’, and it went on in a Box and Cox sort of way right through the four acts, but surely nobody would have done such a thing deliberately, although I did have doubts at first. Of course Rinkley himself would not have made a mistake, but somebody unaccustomed to the daggers might have got them mixed up. The theatrical dagger looked very realistic. Marcus Lynn had it copied from a valuable one, I believe.”

“Where did the lethal dagger come from?”

“Oh, Marcus Lynn has rather a good collection of swords and daggers. He brought along a number to the first full rehearsal and let people choose their own. He took the rest away with him, I thought, but there must have been one left over. He himself had the only key to the props cupboard, so I suppose he would know.”

“The police, I suppose, have the dagger with which Mr Bourton killed himself. Is it possible that he committed suicide deliberately?”

“I suppose it’s possible on the grounds of ‘what private griefs they have, alas! I know not’, but I should consider it most unlikely. It’s true that his wife

was away from home a good deal—she’s a professional actress and was only ‘between shows’ when she consented to lend herself to us for *The Dream*—but from what I’ve heard, Donald Bourton usually managed to console himself during her absences. This I’m sure she knew, and, apparently, she did not resent it.”

“How well do you know her?”

“I had never met her until rehearsals began. I mean, she and her husband and the other married couples have been here for drinks, of course. We had to ask the Bourtons because we were having Brian and Valerie Yorke and Marcus and Emma Lynn, so Donald and Barbara seemed the obvious couple to make up the party.”

“What makes you think that she did not object to her husband’s amusing himself while she was in London or on tour?”

“Oh, they were the modern style of husband and wife, you know. ‘You go your way, I’ll go mine, and no hard feelings.’ That sort of thing.”

“Have they any children?”

“Not so far as I know.”

“Did she maintain him out of her earnings?”

“Good gracious, no. He was a partner in a firm of turf accountants with betting shops all over the place. I should think he was doing very nicely. Barbara showed me a bracelet she was wearing and I’d hate to guess what it cost. She said, ‘Donald gave it me when the favourite blew up at Doncaster and came in fifth, and an absolute outsider cantered home’.”

“I suppose the bookmakers take certain risks, though.”

“Minimal ones, I’d say. It’s the punters who drop the money.”

“Like Priscilla Wimbush in *Crome Yellow*, who dropped it in handfuls and hatfuls on every racecourse in the country.”

“Oh, yes, and then she turned to the occult and the casting of horoscopes and all that kind of thing, didn’t she? Oh, here’s Jon. Have the police gone, darling?”

“Yes, I’ve just seen them off.”

“What did they have to say?”

“Oh, the usual things—how, when and why—but of course I couldn’t really tell them anything. They wanted to see the props, so I’ve sent them round to Marcus Lynn. He collected everything up when he left here this morning. They didn’t seem too pleased about that.”

Chapter 8

Speculations

“First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on.”



W e would like to have kept our costumes,” said Rosamund to Laura.
“But they belong to Mr Lynn, don’t they?”

“Yes, but he told Signora she could have them for the dancing class. She asked for them, I expect. She always asks our mummies and daddies for things, so I expect she asked Mr Lynn. Whenever we are in a dance display she asks if she can keep the costumes, and the mummies and daddies always say yes, because, if they said no, their children wouldn’t get nice parts next time. My daddy calls her ‘that old squirrel’, but Mummy says she can’t make much money out of that dance class and think of the bonus every Saturday morning. What’s a bonus?”

“An extra. A free gift.”

“But Signora doesn’t give them anything, ever, not every Saturday morning or any other time.”

“Isn’t it every Saturday morning that you and Edmund go to dancing class?”

“Yes, but that’s a bonus for Signora, not for Mummy and Daddy.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. When I was a little girl we were always packed off to Sunday School. I expect the principle is the same. Do you like going to dancing class?”

“Oh, yes, it’s lovely.”

“Well, I didn’t like going to Sunday School, so perhaps *you* get a bonus, after all.”

“We would rather have kept our costumes.”

“They were very pretty, I thought. Whose toy dog was it?”

“I didn’t see any toy dogs. I didn’t take a *toy* dog, only the real ones.”

“Somebody called Moonshine had a toy dog. She also had a bush of thorns and a lantern.”

“We didn’t see that part of the play. I expect the things belonged to Yolanda.

She has lots of toys.”

“What happened to the grown-up people’s costumes?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps Mr Lynn gave them to Mr Yorke for another play.”

“More likely they were hired and went back to the shop.”

“No, they were all made specially, I think. Daddy hired a car once when ours was at the garage, and I think Mr Lynn hired the dogs, not the costumes.”

“Dogs are ‘props’. Mustn’t touch ‘props’,” said Edmund. “Mrs Yorke very cross. Not to go near them. Must not take dogs into bed. Dogs have fleas.”

“The toy dog was a prop, too,” said Laura. “Surely you saw it? It must have been somewhere where Moonshine could pick it up when it was needed. Where would that be?”

“Oh, the things were on tables, but nobody except Yolanda and the grown-ups could go near them,” explained Rosamund. “Yolanda could look at them because her little knife was a prop, but Mr Yorke was there all the time when Yolanda was, and so was Mrs Yorke, because they were all in the same part of the play.”

“Mrs Yorke was very cross,” said Edmund reminiscently.

“We were with Signora and the fairies,” said Rosamund. “We didn’t mean to be naughty when we took the dogs to bed. They liked it and we liked having them.”

“I expect you did. They were lovely creatures. You said you thought they were hired.”

“I think they were, because I don’t think Mr Lynn or Mr Yorke have any dogs of their own.”

“Who do these belong to?”

“Mr Woolidge. He breeds them. Do you know why they’re called bloodhounds?”

“Because they used to chase runaway slaves, I believe.”

“No, that’s not true. That’s what people think, but it isn’t true. They’re called bloodhounds because they’ve got bloodshot eyes. Peter Woolidge told me, and it must be true because he knows everything. He is my favourite, not like Mr Rinkley. Mr Rinkley has bloodshot eyes, but that’s because he drinks too much, then it makes him sick.”

“Who told you that?”

“Yolanda Yorke. She heard her daddy say so. Yolanda was given the dogs to mind when she was not on the stage. I wish I could have been given the dogs to mind.”

“ ‘Ark, ‘ark, the dogs do bark,” said Edmund, “only it was a bird in the long grass.”

“Do you like Yolanda?” asked Laura.

“Oh, yes. She is called an only child, so her mummy and daddy give her lots of things. She was a page-boy called Phil something and she had a knife, but her mummy only let her have it for one scene because it was a real knife and very sharp, although it was only a little one. She showed it me.”

“When?”

“At the dress rehearsal, when the fairy bits were over. When Edmund and Lucien and Ganymede were in bed and Cook and Carrie were in the kitchen doing their oojah board, I put on my dressing-gown and went down to the woods. Then I took the dogs upstairs after Yolanda showed me her knife. Then Mrs Yorke came and was cross and took the dogs back.”

“I thought you said the props were on tables and nobody was allowed to touch them, so how did Yolanda come to show you her knife?”

“At the dress-rehearsal Yolanda wore her belt with the dagger in it all the time. She was in the first scene and she wore the belt with the dagger and she showed it me before she went on the stage. After that, her mummy wouldn’t let her wear it until the hunting-scene, so at the dress rehearsal I asked her to show it me. It was in a leather sheath, but I wanted to see the real knife. Yolanda said she wasn’t supposed to take it out of the sheath, but she said she would if I would hear her her part. She did not have anything to say in the first scene, just to stand there behind Mr Yorke’s chair, but she had to speak in the last scene and say that Mr Yorke wouldn’t want to see the workmen’s play because it was silly, but Mr Yorke couldn’t have thought it was silly, because they did it, all the same.”

“How do you know? You never saw the last scene, did you?”

“No, but Yolanda told me. So when I had heard her her part, she heard me mine. We all practised our parts a lot. Mr Woolidge and Mrs Bourton practised their parts more than anybody, because they were supposed to be in love, so they went into the woods when they were not on the stage and practised being in love.”

“Very painstaking of them, but how do you know? I thought you were with Signora Moretti when you weren’t on stage.”

“Oh, that was only for the three proper nights. The other times we did as we liked, mostly. I used to get out of bed and go down to the woods and—”

Laura thought it was time to get away from Lysander and Hermia and their

impromptu rehearsals in the woods. She managed this by asking, “Did Yolanda show you the other daggers?”

“Oh, no. Well, she couldn’t, because everybody was wearing them.”

“Except Mr Rinkley, I think. His dagger was in his belt and his belt would have been on the table. As I remember the play, he didn’t need it until the last scene.”

“We didn’t go near the tables. Yolanda showed me her knife, but on the real nights Yolanda wasn’t allowed to wear it any more until the part of the play us fairies never saw.”

“So you didn’t see what was on the tables at the side of the stage, not even the toy dog?”

“No, but I wouldn’t have wanted to see a toy dog when there were the real ones. Edmund cried when Mrs Yorke came and took the dogs out of our beds.”

“She bit me,” said Edmund. “That’s why I cried.”

“Of course she didn’t bite you. She said the dogs might bite you if they didn’t like being in bed,” said Rosamund.

“She bit me,” Edmund insisted.

“He got the idea in his head when Mrs Yorke took the dogs,” said Rosamund to Laura. “Cook said people should never put ideas in his head. She said it when Carrie was tossing the pancakes. Cook makes lovely pancakes, but she comes all over alike when they have to be tossed, so Carrie did it and Edmund watched her and it made him laugh, so he picked up the bowl that the batter was still in and threw the batter up in the air and it all fell on him. Cook was terribly cross.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Mummy said to Daddy, ‘You’re not to laugh at him. He’s a very naughty boy’, and Carrie had to take him away and bath him, so Cook had to turn the pancakes with a knife.”

“So you didn’t handle any of the daggers at the real play at all? Are you sure you didn’t?”

“We were with Signora. I told you! Auntie Deb was with us a lot of the time, too, and so was Mr Bourton and so was Peter Woolidge. Mr Bourton said to Auntie Deb, ‘Your eyes are lodestars’, and Auntie Deb said, ‘The dice are loaded, too, my lad, so don’t be silly’, and Mr Bourton said, ‘I always play with my own dice’, and Auntie Deb said, ‘Cheats never prosper’, and Signora said, ‘*ben trovato*’. Signora is really French and her name is Madame Moret, but we have to call her Signora because she says ‘Madame’ stinks of the *bordello*. What is a *bordello*?”

“A home for girls who haven’t got any other.”

“Who was *Ben Trovato*?”

“It does not mean a person. I think it is the Italian for well-played, or something like that.”

“Do you think Yolanda’s bouquet was bigger than mine?”

“Not if Mr Lynn is a gentleman, and I’m sure he is.”

“I’ve checked as far as I can,” said Laura to Dame Beatrice over the telephone when the children had gone out in the car with the chauffeur and handyman, “and it confirms what we already knew. There doesn’t seem any way in which the children—and I don’t mean Rosamund and Edmund only—could have gone anywhere near the props during the actual performances and mucked about with the daggers. The only exception would have been Yorke’s little girl, Yolanda, but it seems that, except when she went to the summerhouse to look at the bloodhounds, she was with her parents and wouldn’t have been allowed to handle the properties on the tables.”

“I have thought from the beginning that the daggers were changed over before that last performance began. I have talked with Jonathan and he thinks the likeliest thing is that the daggers slipped out of the pockets in the belts while they were being carried away at the end of the second performance and were put back in the wrong places before anybody wore them again. This, however, does not account for the theatrical dagger under the table. Of course, it was so unfortunate that the one person who would realise that Pyramus had been provided with the wrong dagger was not in a position to point this out.”

“Too busy expelling indigestible shellfish from his system. As our physiology lecturer used to say: ‘better two feet up than forty feet down’. The process was probably aided by alcohol. I am told that Rinkley had the name for being a bit of a sozzler. In any case, surely he must have known that the beastly things were indigestible?”

“Not if he had never eaten mussels before.”

“And if he hadn’t, it was a cloth-headed idea to try them for the first time before making what I suppose, to his way of thinking, was an important public appearance.”

“Perhaps he dined with friends and they provided the mussels. It might have been considered impolite to refuse them under such circumstances.”

“Are you, by any chance, acting as devil’s advocate?”

“Perhaps, and it seems that you are determined to refute me.”

“I always believe the worst and then it’s so much of a relief to find that

things (and people) are not so black as I thought they were.”

“You Celts are born pessimists, of course. Let Rosamund prattle away and give ear to any interpolations Edmund may make. Something useful might emerge. One never knows. Rosamund has told us a good deal already, one way and another.”

“There is a bit to add. Bourton was not the only member of the cast to pursue his *amours* under the leafy branches. Tom Woolidge and Barbara Bourton—”

“Dear me! Rosamund *does* appear to have told tales out of school!”

“Innocently, as always. She thought they were rehearsing their love scenes. My guess is that the so-called rehearsals were confined to pretty brief and relatively chaste encounters. They wouldn’t have dared be away from the rest of the company for any length of time. This is a funny old business. Nothing that, between us, we know seems to add up to a motive for murder, and yet I can’t get away from the idea that Bourton’s death was no accident. The only point at issue is whether the ‘accident’ happened to the right person, the one for whom it was intended.”

“What do we know ‘between us’, as you put it?”

“That Bourton was a womaniser, Rinkley was a heel, Mrs Yorke a bit of a shrew, Jonathan a strong-arm man with a beast of a temper (which we knew), Tom Woolidge probably Barbara Bourton’s fancy man, and (rather important, I think) that, in whatever way those daggers got changed over, it was not because children had been meddling with the things on the ‘props’ tables.”

“An admirable summing up. ‘Proceed, moon.’ ”

“That’s another thing. The woman who was Moonshine had three things to pick up from the table. She would have had the chance to fiddle with the sword-belts and switch the daggers if she had so desired.”

“You postulate that Bourton’s death was no accident, and I agree with you.”

“Yes, and if it wasn’t an accident, then the lethal dagger obviously was meant for Rinkley.”

“The one person who would have been certain there had been a substitution, whether intentional or otherwise, and would not have used the dagger on himself.”

“I suppose,” said Laura, “it couldn’t have been suicide?”

“On Mr Bourton’s part? You mean *he* changed over the daggers?”

“Or on Rinkley’s. It could cut either way. If you’re right, and the daggers were changed over before the play opened on the third night, Rinkley could have done it. He seems a nasty bit of work and may have had problems we know

nothing about. On the other hand, Bourton may have got himself into a mess over some woman and chosen a way out. In that case, he could only have changed over the daggers when he knew he'd got to take over the part. He would have had an easy opportunity, with all the fuss over Rinkley's collapse going on."

"The daggers were changed over before the third performance began," said Dame Beatrice. "I am sure about that. There were far too many people within sight of all the properties for any undetected substitution to have been possible, even after Mr Rinkley was taken ill."

"Then who was the lethal dagger meant for? Rinkley's illness couldn't have been faked. Dr Jeanne-Marie would have spotted a malingerer at once."

"Whoever changed over the daggers may not have bargained for Dr Delahague. All the same, you are quite right to raise doubts. All would be clearer if we knew which of three men was supposed to use the dagger on himself."

"*Three men?*"

"Certainly. The original suggestion was not that Bourton, but that Jonathan, should understudy Rinkley."

"And Jonathan had thumped Rinkley in the stomach and made him sick, and Rinkley had eaten mussels and no doubt washed them down with strong waters and made himself sick—oh, but there's a flaw in that. Everybody would have known that Bourton was to be the stand-in and not Jonathan."

"I doubt whether the changeover had been broadcast. Nobody, least of all the understudy, ever thinks a principal will be laid low. I doubt whether either Jonathan or Mr Bourton ever gave the matter another thought."

"And nobody could have known that Rinkley was going to make himself ill on the third night and be unable to play Pyramus."

"Nobody except Rinkley himself, perhaps. He may have had his own reasons for opting out."

The medical practitioners, Dr Fitzroy and Dr Jeanne-Marie, his wife, had a surgery in the old part of the town, but lived in a large modern bungalow facing the bay. The bay was almost an inland sea and it covered a vast area bounded on one side by marshy tracts of flat land through which a broad river meandered from its water-meadows into the lake-like harbour, and on the opposite side by an opening to the English Channel not more than a fifth of a mile across. A ferry service connected both arms of the bay and led to a waste of low-lying country divided from the open sea by the only road across what was virtually a large island. On this side, heavy loose sand gave way in time to steep chalk cliffs

which ran inland to form a long, low range of hills from which a view of the entire bay could be obtained.

The Delahagues' bungalow was one of a number of widely spaced dwellings which had an uninterrupted view of the harbour and only its own front garden, the road, and another stretch of sand, which was covered at high tide, to separate it from the flotilla of yachts and small cruisers which were anchored in the shallow waters.

Dr Jeanne-Marie, apprised of a visit from Dame Beatrice, welcomed her with regal courtesy and then said, with inconsequential naivety, "I have to attend surgery in half an hour. Will you be staying long?"

"No, I assure you. I would like to ask one question, if I may. You remember the man, a Mr Rinkley, who was taken ill at the third performance of last Saturday's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?"

"Of course I remember. When he said he had eaten mussels I thought maybe he had been poisoned by myelotoxin and I got him to hospital."

"And was he poisoned by myelotoxin? I believe not."

"You are right, but one always takes precautions. If he was poisoned at all, it was by an excess of alcohol. As for the other, it is always as well to be on the safe side, although I have not come across a case of myelotoxin which was fatal. They will keep him under observation for a few days and he will suffer no permanent ill-effects from his collapse."

"Did he think he had been poisoned by the mussels? I think there was more than that and alcohol to blame."

"He says not, but I do not think that is the truth."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"He was heard to say something to the effect that it was the mussels, but there was something else."

"Interesting. Thank you very much for allowing me to visit you."

"You think that the death of Mr Bourton was a strange one. So do I. Are you with the police? I know of your work, of course."

"I am not with the police at present. I am inquisitive by nature, that is all, and I was present at the first performance of the play."

"If you have any more questions at any time, I shall take pleasure in doing my best to answer them."

"There is one more. Had either man, the one who ate the mussels or the one who killed himself, ever been a patient of yours?"

"The first, no; Mr Bourton, yes, he was on my list. He said he preferred a

woman doctor, but I think he just preferred a woman. Oh, do not mistake me! His conduct was most correct, but—well, one received an impression.”

“Yes,” said Dame Beatrice, “I think Mrs Jonathan Bradley, my niece by marriage, had received the same impression.”

“She is very attractive,” said the dark goddess, displaying the generosity which one beautiful woman can afford to extend to another. “I have to attend the inquest, as I was the doctor who saw the body before the police surgeon arrived. Shall you be present?”

“As an interested onlooker, yes.”

“Mr Rinkley’s wife keeps an antiques shop in the old town,” said Jeanne-Marie. Her dark eyes met those of Dame Beatrice.

“So you thought that, too?” said the old woman. “It seemed to me likely that an extra dagger was involved.”

“It was a strange ending to the play. The dagger which killed will be produced in court, no doubt. The inquest should be very interesting,” said Dr Jeanne-Marie. “There is another thing. Mr Bourton was a turf commission agent. Somebody may have owed him money, don’t you think, and was not willing to pay?”

“You have enlightened me on what may be two important matters, but much remains merely speculative at present.”

“Yes,” said Jeanne-Marie. “It can be baffling to work in the semi-darkness, and, with your gifts, you should not be called upon to do so. Our conversation is completely confidential, of course?”

“You hardly need to ask. What makes you suspect that there was more to Mr Bourton’s death than appears on the surface?”

“Those daggers were used on three previous occasions; at the dress rehearsal, at Thursday’s performance, at Friday’s performance. At Saturday’s performance the man who has used the retractable dagger three times in perfect safety is taken violently ill—oh, yes, there is no doubt that the mussels and the whisky had played havoc and I know you suspect something more which the hospital did not check. The illness came at a point in the play when there was no time to be lost in putting on an understudy and—*ciel!*—that understudy is stabbing himself to death because he and everybody else would be in too much of a hurry to check the equipment and discover that the wrong dagger was in the belt.”

“You mean that if Mr Rinkley had been taken ill before the play opened, the dagger would have been checked? I wonder whether that is so? As you say, the harmless dagger had already been used three times. *Would* it have been checked

each time?”

“I do not know whether it *would* have been, but I am quite sure that it *should* have been. Had all the daggers used in the play been fitted with retractable blades there might have been some excuse for not checking them, but when three out of the four are known to be lethal weapons, I am sure that any conscientious producer would have made certain that the only dagger which was to be used was the harmless one.”

“I cannot dispute that point.”

“However, the daggers were not checked, it seems.”

“One would have thought that Mr Rinkley himself would have checked to make sure that the dagger he was to use on himself was harmless.”

“Yes. It gives one to think, does it not? I wonder what Mr Rinkley had against Mr Bourton?”

“Or against my nephew Jonathan. But these are wild speculations which, for the present, we would be wise to keep to ourselves.”

Chapter 9

Coroner's Court

“Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show.”



It was significant that at the inquest on Donald Bourton the coroner sat without a jury.

“So it’s going to be a verdict of accident or misadventure,” muttered Tom Woolidge to Jonathan. “Thank goodness for that!”

“Thank Marcus Lynn, you mean,” Jonathan softly replied. “He has graft in this here town.”

Barbara Bourton (‘pale, but composed’ wrote the reporters) gave evidence of the identity of the dead man, and then the medical witnesses were called. The cause of death was simple and undisputed. The deceased had died from a single blow from a sharp implement which had been driven with considerable force into the heart, by his own hand and accidentally.

It was clear that the coroner was in no mood to hustle the proceedings along. He was the senior partner in a firm of local solicitors and his most interesting enquiry so far had been into a case of treasure trove. This had been turned up by a man using a metal detector and was in the form of a cache of Roman silver found on a farm. It was a moot point whether the finder had been trespassing at the time, so the question of a reward had been a tricky one and the case had proved to be a cause of considerable, although strictly local, interest, since the landowner was unpopular and the find had been made on what had been a public footpath until it had been ploughed up during the war and never replaced.

All the adult members of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* cast were present at the inquest on Bourton, some as witnesses, the others merely as onlookers, although, as Tom Woolidge pointed out, some of the witnesses had need to watch their own interests, since, whatever the verdict, blame for the death was certain to be apportioned to somebody, if not by the coroner, then by the general public.

“Because, of course, it should never have happened,” he said, before the

inquest opened. "Some slip-up, some crass carelessness somewhere, you know, and somebody will have to take the rap. I suppose it will rest between Lynn and Yorke. Once the props had been sorted out and apportioned at the dress rehearsal, nobody else handled any of the things except us with our own bits and pieces, but those were laid out on the tables in the wings. Any of us could have had access to them."

"Yes," said his brother, "but you know what people are. They're as jealous as kids when it comes to keeping an eye on their own property and not giving a damn about anything which belongs to other people. If a dozen substitutions of daggers had been made, I bet nobody would have noticed, not even Bradley and yourself. So long as each of you was satisfied he'd got his own dagger, he wouldn't have given a thought to the weapon that was in Bourton's belt."

"I know. The tragedy is that if Rinkley had been playing the part on the Saturday instead of making himself ill with all those loathsome, indigestible mussels, he would have known at once that he'd got the wrong dagger."

"Funny the right one should have got kicked under the trestle table in that way and got lost in the shadows. I wonder whether that will be mentioned?"

"The only effective floodlighting from that point of view is the powerful stuff they use on professional soccer pitches or to light an open-air boxing-ring. The lighting we had in Bradley's garden cast shadows all over the place. It's difficult to understand, though, how a dangerous weapon got into the only belt from which the dagger was actually going to be used."

The conversation had been terminated by the coroner's opening remarks followed by Barbara Bourton's identification of the body and the calling of the medical evidence. The first doctor called Jeanne-Marie Delahague. She explained that she had been called backstage towards the end of the play, had been shown the body of Donald Bourton and had had no difficulty in deciding that he was, dead.

"It was the second time that evening that a doctor had been called for," she said.

"The second time, Doctor?"

"Oh, yes. You see, this dead man should not have been playing the part, but this other actor had been taken ill and I took the precaution of ordering him to hospital, so a substitute had to be found and this man who so unfortunately stabbed himself to death was that substitute."

She then testified that it was by her orders that neither the body nor anything connected with it was touched until authority took over.

“You mean you suspected foul play?”

“Certainly not. I was in the front row of the audience and saw exactly what happened. There was nothing whatever to cause suspicion. The deceased died by his own hand. Nobody was near him. He took the centre of the stage and in the background were eight other people, four seated, the others standing behind them or slightly to the side, but there was a gap of at least three yards between them and Mr Bourton.”

“Will you describe exactly what happened, Doctor?”

Jeanne-Marie gave a bald, unemotional account of what she had seen.

“What was the dead man wearing?”

“A simple, white tunic. He had removed the breastplate which had formed part of the costume.”

“Did you realise that he had actually stabbed himself with a lethal weapon?”

“No. I saw the dagger sticking up from his body, but I concluded that it had a retractable blade as used in theatricals.”

“Surely the blood from the wound would have shown up on a white tunic?”

“No, because he was almost recumbent when he stabbed himself, so there would be an internal haemorrhage. This has been shown to be the case.” As she was speaking, every eye was directed at the exhibits which had been brought into the courtroom.

“Can you identify the dagger in question?”

“I can speak only of the appearance of its hilt. When the body was removed to the mortuary the dagger was still in position and I had not touched it.”

“I see. Now, Doctor, five sheathed daggers will be put before you. I must ask you not to handle them. You will see that they are numbered. Will you please write (on the paper the clerk will give you) the number of the weapon which killed Mr Bourton?”

The daggers were placed on the ledge which surrounded the witness-box. Dr Jeanne-Marie surveyed them, but made no attempt to write anything down. The coroner prompted her, but she said, “It cannot be a joke that we play here?”

“A joke? Certainly not, Doctor.”

“You ask me that I shall write down the number which is on the dagger which killed Mr Bourton?”

“Yes, if you please.”

“But I cannot do it. I saw only a hilt, as I am telling you. Also you will realise that I saw it in floodlighting which made many dark shadows. I did not touch the weapon and I do not propose to make any attempt to identify it, as it is

similar to another which you show me.”

The coroner accepted this without comment and called the police surgeon. That official was also consultant to the local hospital and had been present when the dagger had been removed from Bourton’s body. He confirmed that the victim had suffered an immense internal haemorrhage and he made no bones about identifying the lethal dagger. The number he wrote down was handed to the coroner by the clerk. The coroner looked at it and asked sharply:

“Did you handle the dagger at the hospital, Doctor?”

“No. I supervised its removal and then examined the deceased.”

“You at no time handled the dagger?”

“I believe not. In fact I am sure not.”

“Thank you, Doctor. It seems that Doctor Delahague’s reluctance to identify the dagger she saw was founded on sound judgment.”

Dame Beatrice saw the police inspector, who was seated next to Marcus Lynn at the witnesses’ table, suddenly stiffen. Then he wrote something down and beckoned to the coroner’s officer. That official received the slip of paper and passed it to the coroner’s clerk who handed it to the coroner. Dame Beatrice, seated in the public gallery next to Deborah, murmured:

“The consultant surgeon has identified the wrong dagger.”

The coroner returned to the witness and asked for a further description of the injury which had resulted in Bourton’s death ‘with as few technicalities as possible, please’. Keeping this last request in mind, the consultant explained that the wound had been delivered from the front, had slanted backwards and downwards and had made a large slit from which blood had poured internally into the cavity of the chest.

“Were there no signs of external bleeding?”

“None.”

“Did you find that surprising?”

“No. I was told that the body was in a prone or semi-prone position when the blow was struck. All the bleeding was internal, a really massive haemorrhage in the cavity of the chest. There is a case in Professor Keith Simpson’s autobiography—”

“Thank you, Doctor. Call Jonathan Bradley.”

After Jonathan, Tom Woolidge was called. Each was asked to identify the dagger he had worn during the performances. These two daggers were then removed, leaving three which, in their sheaths, looked very much alike. Yorke was called.

“You produced the play?”

“And directed it, pretty much.”

“Where were the theatrical properties kept when they were not in use?”

“Our performances were held out of doors in a private garden. All the costumes and the bits and pieces were kept up at the house.”

“So how many people had access to them?”

“Nobody but our sponsor who, incidentally, had renewed the licence which permitted us to charge for seats at the play.”

“Very proper, but that is not the concern of this enquiry. What the court would wish to know is how a dangerous weapon was substituted for the theatrical dagger which we assume had been used with perfect safety at the previous performances.”

“At the dress rehearsal, too,” said the witness. “Rinkley tried it out on the table before he trusted it enough to use it on himself and, when he did, he struck himself with it so gingerly that I had to encourage him to make the blow look a bit more like the real thing. The way he used the dagger, it wasn’t even going to stay upright and, although the play was a comedy, I didn’t want laughs in the wrong place.”

“In the wrong place, Mr Yorke?”

“Yes. I didn’t want the audience giggling as the dagger teetered slowly to the floor. For one thing, it would have spoilt Thisbe’s entrance and we should have lost the bit of by-play where she plucks the dagger out of Pyramus and sticks it in her own tummy.”

“Perhaps we could return to the point at issue. How did the lethal dagger get substituted for it?”

“That’s just what I myself would like to know. Also, who kicked the theatrical dagger under the table instead of picking it up and putting it back into its belt.”

“You can offer no explanation?”

“None at all. I helped Lynn and his son to carry the things down after we had dished out the costumes to the actors, and I helped them carry the oddments back at the end of each performance. I waited with him while the actors returned their costumes and then the room we used as a wardrobe was locked up. The props were locked up in a cupboard in the same room and Lynn held both keys, the ones to the cupboard and the room.”

“Were there no duplicate keys?”

“No,” said Jonathan, from his seat. “As the present occupier of the house I

can assure you that there were no duplicate keys.”

“What’s more,” said Marcus Lynn, also from the witnesses’ part of the court, “the two keys mentioned were never out of my possession.”

The coroner accepted these interjections without comment and then turned to the circumstances which had led to the installation of Bourton as Pyramus.

“For the benefit of those whose knowledge of the play is not exhaustive,” said the coroner, “I should explain, perhaps, that the character in question takes part in a burlesque version of a tragic story in which the hero is supposed to commit suicide, a theatrical weapon with a retractable blade having been provided for this purpose.”

“And used harmlessly at the other performances,” Yorke reminded the gathering.

“Now, there arises a question of the deceased having taken over the part. This must have been at short notice,” the coroner went on.

“Yes, indeed, at very short notice. It meant he had to change his costume in a great hurry. The actor whose place he took became ill and could not continue in the part.”

“Is that actor in court?”

“No, sir, he is still under observation in hospital,” said the inspector of police.

“I see. Well, it would hardly seem that he could help us. Now, Mr Yorke, under what circumstances could the daggers have been changed over?”

“I have no more idea than anybody else.”

“Let us recapitulate. Will you tell the court how many daggers were used in the play?”

“There was the theatrical dagger which should have been in Bourton’s sword-belt, but apparently wasn’t, then Bradley and Woolidge each had a real one, as you have heard, and the court page had a dagger, but I believe she took her belt off when she was not on stage, and wore the dagger in only one short scene.”

“She?”

“Yolanda, my daughter, a child of nine.”

“Is she in court?”

“No.”

“Could she—playfully, of course—have changed over the daggers?”

“Certainly not. All the properties were laid out on trestle tables in the wings and were under constant surveillance from members of the cast. All the children

were also under constant supervision. There is no way that Yolanda could have substituted one dagger for another and, in any case, she would never dream of doing such a thing.”

“Then can you not suggest *any* way in which the weapons could have got changed over?”

“No, I can’t. It is a mystery to me. The theatrical dagger wasn’t found until all the properties had been returned to the house and the trestle tables taken down to be stored in the summerhouse until the workmen who were to dismantle the floodlights and amplifiers could collect everything on the Monday. The day following the play was a Sunday, of course. The dagger would have been in shadow under the table. That is why neither Bourton nor anybody else spotted it and it was not found until everything was cleared away.”

“Call Marcus Lynn.”

Lynn went into the witness box and glanced at the daggers which remained on the ledge. Before the coroner could question him he said, pointing:

“Hey! One of these is the retractable dagger, and I recognise that one, but the last one I’ve never seen before. It does not come from my collection. What jiggery-pokery is this? If that’s the dagger which killed Bourton, I’ve no knowledge of it whatever.”

The inspector of police got to his feet.

“If you’ll refer to the note I sent up, Mr Coroner,” he said, “the police would like an adjournment at this point.”

But at this point there was another interruption. “I want to say something else. If the police or anybody thinks there is any chance that my husband knew he had picked up the wrong dagger and deliberately committed suicide with it,” said Barbara Bourton, standing up and taking, as it were, the centre of the stage, “I assure you that nothing could have been further from his mind. He was a happy, lighthearted man in a good financial position, enjoying excellent health and with no worries of any kind. I want that placed on record.”

“Thank you, Mrs Bourton. The inquest is adjourned *sine die*,” said the coroner, gathering up his papers.

“Well, that was a turn-up for the book,” said Jonathan, when he had settled his wife and Dame Beatrice in the car. “The coroner hadn’t bargained for an adjournment. Did you tip the police any winks, Aunt Adela?”

“No. The evidence we heard spoke for itself, I thought.”

“You mean that cuckoo in the nest, the extra dagger. Of course, Lynn may have been lying when he said it wasn’t one of his. I’ll tell you what, though: that

dagger was so much like the theatrical one to look at that I wish I could have picked up the pair of them to compare the respective weights.”

“It wouldn’t really help,” said Deborah. “Donald would not have known the difference since, until he had to act as Rinkley’s understudy, he had never handled either dagger. He had a sword when he was Oberon. Marcus was most particular that nobody should handle the props except the people who actually used them and, once he had locked them away each time, nobody could fool about with them because he had the only key to the cupboard. The only people who could have got at them by picking the lock were Jon and myself and, of course, we wouldn’t dream of doing anything so frightful.”

“Even if you had dreamed of doing it, I don’t believe you know how,” said Dame Beatrice. “*Do* you know how, Jonathan?”

“Every schoolboy knows how. But another thought has been on my mind. I haven’t mentioned it to you, but, as it happens, I could have been Rinkley’s stand-in instead of poor Bourton. When the question of understudies came up fairly early on in the rehearsal periods, it was suggested that we should leave the final court scene to Yorke, his missus, Tom Woolidge, Emma Lynn and Barbara Bourton, and that I should double up as Pyramus if necessary, leaving my one or two speeches as Demetrius for Tom to make. I believe we told you about that. My looks were thought unsuitable for farce.”

“It was so obvious that it would be better to cut the last fairy scene and leave what had to be said to young Peter Woolidge as Puck. Oberon was to take on Pyramus instead of you, leaving you in your original part,” said Deborah.

“And did the whole cast know that this was the final arrangement?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“No reason why they shouldn’t have known,” replied Jonathan. “There was no secret about it.”

“The change was decided upon at our little cocktail party,” said Deborah, “and I don’t think anybody bothered about it, or even remembered it until Rinkley was taken ill on the third night. After all, Rinkley was the last person we expected would give up his part. He was dead keen on it, especially the Pyramus bit. It was very bad luck on him to have to fall by the wayside and miss all the applause.”

“You interest me,” said Dame Beatrice. “Supposing the producer had kept to the first arrangement, do you think, Jonathan, that, as Pyramus, you would have known you had the wrong dagger?”

“Can’t be sure. I did handle the retractable one when it was produced for

rehearsals, but I expect I would have taken the props for granted, just as poor Bourton seems to have done.”

“All the same,” said Deborah, “it would be interesting to know whether that dangerous dagger was already in the belt when Donald put it on, or whether he found the pocket was empty, spotted an extra dagger on the table and took it, thinking it was the one with the retractable blade and had got itself disassociated from its belt. I think I agree with the police that there will have to be more enquiries.”

“Bad luck on us, then. They may be crawling all over the house and grounds for days,” said Jonathan.

“When do you expect Simon and Penelope back?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“Oh, in about a fortnight, I suppose.”

“Well, Laura and I are perfectly willing to keep the children with us. You will be glad to have them out of the way of the police. Perhaps you would prefer *my* company?”

Deborah picked up Dame Beatrice’s yellow hand and pressed it gratefully.

“You’ll be a tower of strength against the police,” she said.

“We shall have the reporters, too! We’ve had quite a bucketful of those lads already, and now that the inquest has been adjourned, with all the sinister overtones caused by that sensational proceeding, they’ll be round us like flies round a honey-pot,” said Jonathan.

“Yes, I’m afraid they will,” Dame Beatrice agreed. “It was indeed a sensational ending to what, at first glance, seemed a straightforward case of accidental death.”

“Whereas now, in spite of Barbara Bourton’s declaration, suicide seems more likely,” said Jonathan. “After all, Barbara can’t know all that much about Bourton’s private affairs. They don’t seem to have cohabited all that often owing to her stage career and, I suppose, his business interests.”

“One thing has been mentioned,” said Deborah, “so it can be mentioned again. I suppose one of his clients didn’t hit on a way of getting rid of him so as to avoid paying racing debts?”

“There are other kinds of debts,” said Dame Beatrice. Deborah nodded.

“Such as those owed by cuckolded husbands, I suppose,” she said. “Yes, Donald was a dashing lad, in his way, and somebody may have taken exception to that fact.”

“But surely not to the point of murdering him,” said Jonathan.

Chapter 10

Further Suggestions

“What, a play toward! I’ll be an auditor.”



Jonathan changed the subject.
“You mean,” he said to his aunt, “you *do* mean you can stay on for a day or two and see us through?”

“And leave poor Laura the responsibility for Rosamund and Edmund,” said Deborah. “How thankful I am, though,” she added. “I hate the thought of coping with more police questioning. They must suspect something is wrong with Donald’s death, or they would never have asked to have the inquest adjourned. Obviously that wasn’t on the agenda.”

“I think the police will be busy finding out where the extra dagger came from. I doubt whether they will trouble you very much. Their main targets, so far as the cast of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is concerned, will be Mr Yorke and the Lynns. Nobody else seems to have had access to the properties until they were laid out in the wings ready for the actors and, from what I have gathered, it would have been almost impossible for one dagger to have been exchanged for another without somebody witnessing the substitution,” said Dame Beatrice.

“While the death was regarded as accidental I don’t suppose people charged their memories about anything they may have noticed,” said Jonathan, “but, once the reporters get busy about the adjournment, maybe somebody will remember something which was not in the least questionable at the time, but may bear considerable significance now.”

“The local papers are bound to go to town in a big way,” said Deborah. “I bet they haven’t had a story like this for years. I almost wish I were a reporter. How I could spread myself on the romantic setting, the perfect summer night, the delightful comedy complete with fairy lore—and then the sudden change, bizarre and terrifying, to tragedy and dire confusion.”

“There wasn’t dire confusion,” said Jonathan. “Dr Jeanne-Marie and Marcus Lynn between them saw to that.”

“Well, anyway, the reporters will make hay. I dread them much more than I dread the police.”

“If I were you,” said Dame Beatrice, “I would go out for the day and leave me to cope.”

“Won’t they think that fishy?”

“Why should they? So far as you two are concerned the death was the result of a completely unforeseen accident.”

“No,” said Jonathan, “we’ll stay. If we try to dodge them today, they will only come back tomorrow. Well are they called newshounds. Once on the trail they never give up, and the more I think about it the more it seems to me that they could be following a very hot scent indeed.”

The reporters, however, were not the menace which Deborah had expected. Before the inquest they had photographed the outside of the house and such parts of the grounds as interested them, so when they did turn up it was to reinforce what had become their theme-song. This can be summarised in the words of a banner headline in the *Graphic Newsletter*, which screamed from the front page, *Where did the lethal weapon come from?*

Other papers were asking the same question in the same or similar words, inspired, no doubt, by the police, who, not for the first time, were finding the local newspapers extremely useful. There was also the local radio station, which, like the newspapers, furnished a description of the weapon. There was also a placard outside the county police station. It showed not only a photograph, but accompanied it with an annotated drawing of the dagger and the caption: *Have you seen this weapon?* The poster was sent to every antiques dealer and junk shop within a radius of fifty miles with a request that if such an object had been sold within the last three months the police would welcome details.

It was the Chief Constable who had suggested the time limit. Police questioning of Lynn and Yorke separately had elicited the information that it was at the March meeting of the dramatic society, held almost at the end of the month, that Lynn, only lately a patron of the amateur players, had asked that the next production should be of *The Dream* and should be performed out of doors.

He told the meeting (with the disarming frankness to which he owed much of his success, although his detractors averred that this seemingly engaging quality covered Machiavellian manoeuvres of such magnitude that they would turn the gnomes of Zurich to plaster of Paris if ever they became generally known) that he wanted a good part in the play for his wife and was prepared to foot the bills for the whole production if she were given the choice of the women’s rôles in the

play.

The dramatic intervention of the police in asking for an adjournment before the coroner pronounced his verdict had changed the whole nature of the enquiry. From appearing to be a case of unfortunate although dreadful accident, there now seemed to be every chance that the death of Donald Bourton would be attributed either to suicide or murder. Lynn's declaration that the death-dealing dagger had never formed part of his collection gave weight to both theories and the first thing which Detective-Inspector Conway wanted to find out was whether Bourton himself had purchased the dagger. If he had, the case was as good as over and a verdict of suicide the appropriate one. If somebody else had purchased it, the case would remain wide open unless malice aforethought could be proved against person or persons (so far) unknown.

"And while you're making the rounds of the antiques dealers," Conway was advised, "we'll get on to Dame Beatrice and ask her to have a good hard look at the people who were in the play. She's bound to be watching the interests of her nephew and his wife who are occupying the house and grounds where the fatality happened, so I'm sure she will be prepared to co-operate with us."

"So long as she isn't watching their interests too closely," said Conway to his sergeant.

"Sir?"

"Oh, dammit, you know what I mean. How unbiased is she going to be when it comes to the crunch? Bradley and his wife had that house to themselves, except for a couple of womenservants and four tiny kids, on each night the play was performed. I've had a look at the cupboard the properties were in. A child of three, given a hairpin, could have picked the lock and we've been told there was no love lost between Bradley—who's a gorilla if ever I met one—and Rinkley, for whom obviously the substituted dagger was intended."

"The theory seems to be that Rinkley would have detected the substitution, sir."

"Yes, if it had been made on the first night of the play. We've been told that he was a bit chary of using the retractable blade on himself at the early rehearsals. Bear in mind, though, that he had already used the thing three times, once at the dress rehearsal and twice at the Thursday and Friday performances, with no ill effects. To my way of thinking, Rinkley wouldn't have given the thing a thought on the third night. He admits as much. I've had the daggers weighed and although the lethal one is a bit heavier than the theatrical one, there isn't so much in it as all that."

This point was being debated elsewhere. Marcus Lynn had come up to the house on 'demolition day', as he termed it, to make sure that his workmen under their foreman carried out the task of clearing up as expeditiously, neatly and unobtrusively as possible, and Deborah had invited him to stay to lunch. The day following the inquest she renewed the invitation over the telephone to include Emma. She added the name of the Lynns' adopted son, but Emma, accepting for herself and her husband, explained that Jasper was in a last frenzy of revision, since his advanced-level examinations started in two days' time.

It was Dame Beatrice who introduced the topic which was in all their minds after the unexpected adjournment.

"And how, Mr Lynn, do you account for the cuckoo in the nest?" she asked.

"I don't account for it; I can't account for it," he replied. "When the inquest was adjourned and the court was cleared, I was given that dagger to handle. The police had all sorts of questions to ask concerning it. They were very reluctant to believe that I had never seen the thing before. In the end I took them to my house and asked Emma to get the catalogue of my collection of weapons. I don't only collect cold steel, you see. I've got some quite valuable guns of various kinds and such things as maces, lances, spears, pikes and so forth. An entire room is devoted to the collection and I keep the catalogue up-to-date myself. Of course it was only the daggers which concerned the police, and I may tell you that they checked and re-checked the items very carefully indeed. I hoped you would be interested, Dame Beatrice, so I've brought along the catalogue, and the exhibits themselves I can show you, if you'd care to see them, at any time which is convenient to you. I'm afraid I can't show you the lethal weapon. The police have impounded that."

"Can you describe it?"

"Oh, yes, near enough. It is not unlike one in my collection, except that the blade is shorter and had been honed down to razor sharpness. They let me take it out of its sheath and I only touched the edge of it with my thumb, yet it parted the skin. It must have gone into poor Bourton like a hot knife into butter."

"Well, it certainly missed any ribs, it seems."

"Have you heard of similar cases, Dame Beatrice? I mean, cases of stabbing with no outward signs of blood?"

"There is the classic case which the police surgeon was prevented from quoting. Usually, I think, there would be some bleeding from the nose and mouth, if not outwardly from the wound itself."

"I suppose that could be taken superficially as a nosebleed. I believe some

such thing was mentioned.”

“Marcus, dear, you are spoiling my lunch,” said Emma.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Dame Beatrice, to have dragged you into such a discussion. I went to see Barbara Bourton before we came here this morning.”

“Ah, yes. I saw her yesterday,” said Deborah. “She seems to be bearing up all right.”

“She is touring again next week, and later on she wants to run her own company. She proposed to resurrect A.A.Milne’s light comedies,” said Emma. “I wonder how they will go down with present-day audiences?”

“I should think they might go down very well. At least they are pleasant and well constructed.”

“She is going to play Kate Camberley in the one-act *Camberley Triangle* as a curtain raiser. The part is made for her. Then she will follow it up with *Belinda* and, for a change, if she can attract the other people she wants, she will play Eustasia in *The Dover Road*, and she might vary that with Olivia in *Mr Pim Passes By*.”

“She will never put that sort of stuff across,” said Jonathan, “any more than you can put across lots of the poetry of the same period. Times have changed. People don’t want cosy domestic comedy and storms in tea-cups, or verses that actually scan and rhyme. They want a challenge, toughness, art which reflects life instead of cushioning it. In a way, you know, Bourton has brought *The Dream* up-to-date by actually killing Pyramus.”

“Let’s adjourn and look at the catalogue Marcus has brought,” said Deborah. “You seem very familiar with A.A.Milne’s plays,” she added to Emma as they went into the drawing-room together.

“Barbara told me of her plans weeks ago, when we first began rehearsals, so I got the plays and read them. I could see her in the various parts as I read. Of course she hadn’t got the capital at that time to form her own company, but Donald seems to have left a lot of money and all of it, Marcus tells me, comes to Barbara, so she will be able to realise all her ambitions now.”

There were more than thirty daggers listed and described and the catalogue was written up in beautiful copperplate. Some of the entries were familiar to Jonathan, since about a dozen of the daggers had been brought along to the dress rehearsal so that he and Tom could make their choice. Listed were a bowie knife, three Italian *cinquedeas* of the late fifteenth century, two French rondel daggers of a century later, a quillon dagger, a ballock or kidney dagger, probably Flemish, and a queer-looking, so called ‘ear’ dagger, all of about the same date.

To the next century belonged a couple of English and Scottish daggers, two left-hand daggers from France and Spain respectively, two Spanish plug-bayonets, a collection of horn-handled, silver-mounted hunting knives and there was a late nineteenth-century Corsican dagger, the property in former times, no doubt, of a brigand.

A second part of the catalogue was devoted to more modern weapons—Commando knives, a German NSKK leader's dagger and an SS officer's dagger of the same era, a very elegant, narrow-bladed dagger which had belonged to a German naval officer, and, separately listed again, a collection of weapons, mostly with curved blades, from the Orient.

Lynn turned back the pages and put his finger down on one of the early entries. The quillon dagger, he said, was nearest in appearance to the retractable dagger 'which, as a matter of fact, I had copied from it', but he went on to say that when the police allowed him to draw the lethal dagger from its sheath, he realised that the point of the dagger nowhere near reached the end of the sheath. The blade, instead of being nearly fifteen inches long, was a bare six inches in length,

"Coincident with what the doctors think was the length of the wound," he said. "Makes you think a bit, doesn't it?"

"Well," said Jonathan to Dame Beatrice when the guests had gone, "it does make you think a bit. The harmless dagger retracted right into the hilt so that all its inches could be assumed to be in Pyramus."

"They would have pinned him to the ground," said Deborah.

"Ah, but, with the retractable dagger, that problem would not arise. With the murderous blade, as somebody had the wit to foresee, it might cause a problem, so he took care to make the blade short enough to get to the right spot with no redundant inches."

"So we really *are* talking about murder or suicide," said Deborah.

"Oh, accident was ruled out long ago, as the police spotted very early on."

"I wonder why Donald didn't realise that the blade was much too short? Surely he must have noticed, the minute he drew the thing out."

"I doubt whether he had ever seen the retractable blade drawn out of the sheath. As Oberon he had been given a sword. He wouldn't have taken any interest in anybody else's 'props'. People are so self-centred, especially when they've got a pretty decent part in a play."

"But if the dagger was meant for Rinkley, he would have spotted the short blade at once and realised it was the wrong dagger," said Deborah.

“Possibly not, you know. He might have thought that the dagger had already retracted itself a bit while it was in the sheath. Anyway, he would probably have been rolling his eyes around in a fine frenzy of ham acting and not really looked at the dagger. Besides he, like most of the others, was a bit sloshed, and the lighting, as everybody will testify, was geared to the fairy scenes and not terribly helpful to the rest of the play.”

“Brian wanted it that way. He said that the operative word in the title was *Night* and that a sense of midsummer mystery must be maintained. Marcus had offered to step up the floodlighting, but he would have none of it.”

“Of course Yorke didn’t like Rinkley much,” said Jonathan. “Remember how he chucked him out of the house because of Yolanda?”

Dame Beatrice asked for an explanation of this. At the back of her mind was something the child Rosamund had said at the Stone House.

“Yolanda? Oh, we don’t know any details and didn’t ask for any,” said Deborah. “Apparently—but it was a long time ago, I believe—Rinkley was involved in a rather unsavoury case of child molestation, so, as there were a number of children in the play, I suppose people kept an eye on him which, perhaps, was rather unfair. We stopped him playing a harmless game with Rosamund because she did not like being tossed up into the air. I think it upset her dignity. As to what happened with Yolanda when Brian gave Rinkley houseroom while his flat was being done up, we have no idea, as I say, but the upshot was that instead of having to put them off because Rinkley was occupying the spare bedroom, the Yorkes could put up our two babes after all.”

“The Yorkes were probably over-zealous,” said Jonathan, “but it was a fault on the right side, I feel.”

“Was Rinkley convicted in the case you mentioned?”

“No, aunt, he wasn’t. The trouble is that these things stick. It’s extremely unfair, but there it is.”

The next development emanated from Lynn, although, having met both of them, Dame Beatrice decided that the actual wording of his letter had been dictated by the far more self-effacing and tactful Emma.

“Please forgive an ignorant, self-educated fellow,” the letter ran, “as I have no notion how to word this request. There is a lot of pressure on me concerning Bourton’s death, as I sponsored the play and provided all the daggers.

“I do realise how eminent you are in your own line, so I hesitate to ask whether you ever accept commissions. The point is that it seems quite obvious that somebody who was in the play had a grudge either against Rinkley or

against Bourton and must have provided that lethal dagger and substituted it for the retractable one. If you could possibly find out *when* that substitution took place, I think I might work out who the offender was. Any further information I can supply—well, you have only to ask for it.

“One pointer, if I can call it such, I have been able to give the police. Because of my hobby I have a specialised knowledge of weapons and I am pretty sure that the dagger with which Bourton killed himself did not begin life as a dagger, but was made from a cut-down rapier. The murderer (one has to use the word, I’m afraid) needed a finely-pointed, narrow-bladed weapon and may have come across this rapier by accident without, at the time, having any evil intentions. Later on perhaps he realised its possibilities, and it is more than likely, I think, that he got hold of a blacksmith and had the dagger made to his own specification. If I am right, the original rapier may have been in his possession for some time, possibly for several years, so I think the police should look for the blacksmith and, in view of the serious nature of what has happened, I doubt whether the smith would be a local man, so they may have their work cut out to find him. Of course, in these days of handymen and precision tools, the fellow may even have done the job himself.

“If you will accept a commission, dear and honoured lady, it would be to investigate the relationships between the various members of the company, their activities on the third night of the play and whether by any chance an outsider could have had any chance of changing over the daggers. I am a student of psychology in an amateur way, and I do not rule out the possibility that the murderer is a woman, particularly if the right (!) person was killed and the dagger was indeed intended for Bourton and not for Rinkley.”

Dame Beatrice showed the letter to Jonathan and Deborah. Deborah said, “Emma wrote that, but Marcus supplied the summary for it.”

Jonathan asked whether Dame Beatrice intended to accept the commission. She cackled and replied that he who supped with the devil must have a long spoon.

Chapter 11

Mytilus Edulis Has Orange Gills

“An actor, too, perhaps, if I see cause.”



Give you a summary of the loves and hates among the cast, my most eccentric and delightful of aunts?” said Jonathan. “Nothing easier, but then I think you had better canvas Deb’s opinion. We see eye to eye in all aspects of living and loving, but we don’t always agree in our reactions towards our acquaintances.”

“That only applies to the people each of us knew before we married,” said Deborah. “It’s a funny thing, and I’ve often noticed it, but hardly any wife can put up with the friends and cronies of her husband’s bachelor days, and that goes for the husband’s view of his wife’s girlhood confidantes. He can’t stand them, as a general rule, unless he falls for one of them. Then the fat really is in the fire.”

“If you are accepting Lynn’s commission,” said Jonathan, “mind you sting him good and plenty. He’s got oodles of money and will be glad to write you off against tax.”

“He couldn’t do that, could he?” asked Deborah seriously.

“I ought to demand payment by results,” said Dame Beatrice. “Payment must be geared to productivity. We are always being told so. Of course, the first thing which would strike an unbiased observer is that the offer of this commission is an attempt, and a crude one, to throw dust in my eyes. You see, other things being equal, (which, of course, they never are), my primary suspect would be Mr Lynn himself. He held the only key to the cupboard in which the properties were kept, so it is obvious that he, among all of you, had very much the best chance of substituting one dagger for another without being detected. I said at the beginning, and I adhere to it, that the daggers were changed over before the last performance began.”

“If that is so, it seems to let out Narayan Rao,” said Jonathan. Dame Beatrice looked enquiringly at him. “Narayan lost an appeal against Rinkley for damage

to his car. I don't know the details. It happened some time ago, but Narayan was on the loser's end and can't have been very pleased about it."

"Would he have been in a position to change over the daggers?"

"Well, he had a chair in the wings not too far from the trestle tables, but the third performance was the only one he saw, so although he may be familiar with the text of the play—he's got a London B.A. degree in English—he certainly knew nothing of our production of it. I really think he should be ruled out."

"How came it that he was given a seat in the wings?"

"He lent us his two-year-old son as the fairy changeling."

"I do not remember the child."

"No, you wouldn't. He had a tummy upset on the first and second nights and did not appear, but he was all right on the Saturday, so Narayan Rao brought him along and looked after him until he was needed. Little Sharma was only on stage for a few minutes and, when Deb handed him back, his father changed him into his street clothes, left his little gold tunic and headband on the chair and took him straight home. The chap Lynn hired to supervise the parking of cars saw them go."

"So Narayan Rao knew nothing of Mr Rinkley's illness?"

"Not at the time, nor, of course, that Bourton killed himself with the substituted dagger. He knows by now, I suppose. Even if he doesn't read the papers he must have heard the gossip. The story is all over the town. It takes Cook and Carrie twice as long as usual to do the marketing, and as for Deb and me, we dread having to stick our noses outside the front door. Fortunately the servants love all the notoriety and fuss and Cook, I believe, lives in hope of selling her story to one of the Sunday papers and reaping a rich harvest."

"Are you *really* accepting a commission from Lynn?" Deborah asked, as Dame Beatrice took out a notebook and, seated at the breakfast table which had just been cleared, began to write.

"I am not in a position to do so. He is not calling me in as consultant psychiatrist, but to find a murderer. The Home Office sometimes calls upon me to do that, and no man can serve two masters."

"You don't really suspect Lynn of changing over the daggers, do you?" asked Jonathan.

"My previous point, that he would have had much the best opportunity to do so, should be borne in mind, and there is another thing which may be of equal importance. On his own showing, he is an expert on weapons and would have seen the possibility of turning a narrow-bladed rapier into a dagger of the

required size. He may also have known of a man who could do the work for him, a man who would have had no suspicions because he had repaired weapons, replaced lost parts, restored mountings and so on and so forth for Mr Lynn, probably over a period of years.”

“If Lynn has anything on his conscience—and what you say, Aunt, does make one think a bit—wasn’t it rather rash of him to point out to you and to the police that the murder weapon was a cut-down rapier?”

“I think he felt he had no option. If I myself had been given an opportunity to examine the weapon, the chances are that I should have known at once that it was made from a rapier. The expert the police will call in will not only realise the same thing, but will date the rapier and may even be able to make a fair estimate of when its transformation to a dagger took place. The weakness of my theory that a modern blacksmith did the work is that the cutting-down process may have been done as early as the seventeenth century, you see.”

“In which case Lynn could be as innocent as I believe him to be,” said Jonathan.

“Hasn’t Aunt Adela undermined your confidence in him just a little, though?” asked Deborah.

“Dented it a trifle; not undermined it.”

“I have made a list of twelve people who were in the play,” said Dame Beatrice, indicating her notebook. “What I would like from you and Deborah is your view of the interrelationships among these twelve people so far as you were able to observe them during the rehearsals.”

“Twelve people? Which of us are you leaving out?” asked Deborah.

“Your two selves, Rosamund and Edmund, the fairies *en bloc*, the child Yolanda, the boy who played Puck and, only for the time being, the young man who was Egeus.”

“The last one is Jasper Lynn, Marcus’s adopted son, whose head is too full of A-levels to bother itself with murder, and the other is Tom Woolidge’s younger brother Peter. You would be right to call him charming,” said Deborah. “He is quite the nicest possible type of really nice boy and has been wonderful in helping to look after the children. I’m glad you’ve left him out of your calculations.”

“*Pro tem* only. I am like Long John Silver. He was fond of young Jim Hawkins and I always wonder whether even Fagin did not feel some affection for the Artful Dodger and the other little rascallions. Categorically, how did Marcus Lynn regard the other eleven on my list?”

“So far as we know, he got on well with all of them. People respected him for choosing anything but a star part for himself and were all grateful for his lavish sponsorship of the show.”

“No case of having to hire your own costume and agree to take at least twenty of the most expensive tickets and either flog them to your friends or pay for them yourself and give them away, she means,” said Jonathan. “I have only one thing to add: he insisted on having his Emma cast as Hermia to begin with. At the first reading the poor girl was so terribly bad that I’m afraid opprobrious remarks were made and some of them may have come to Lynn’s ears. He would not readily forgive anybody who called his wife ‘a silly moo’ and said she would ruin the show.”

“I thought she performed adequately, but not as Hermia.”

“No, she swopped over with Barbara Bourton and then Deb took her in hand, and there weren’t any more complaints. If Lynn had it in for either Rinkley or Bourton, I really don’t think it would have been on Emma’s account. She got plenty of compliments in the end. The ladies who might have taken umbrage because of Rinkley’s comments on their acting were Susan Hythe, Robina Lester and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Caroline Frome.”

“Would those be the women who took workmen’s parts?”

“Yes, indeed. Susan was Flute, otherwise Thisbe, Robina was Starveling, alias Moonshine, and Caroline was Snout, who doubled up as Wall.”

“I remember.”

“Rinkley was anything but complimentary about their efforts during rehearsals, but I don’t think any of them would have gone to the lengths of changing over those daggers, even if they had had the opportunity.”

“They all had access to the properties, no doubt.”

“Oh, yes, that’s true. Susan had to pick up a wrap-over skirt and a small cloak-thing, Robina her thornbush, toy dog and lantern and Caroline the sandwich-board thing she wore as the stonework. I can’t see when any of them could have swapped over the daggers, though, especially as you think that was done before the performances began.”

“Oh, it must have been. Nobody would have taken the risk of changing the daggers in full view of the rest of the cast. This murder was carefully planned. The thing about which I cannot make up my mind is whether the victim was the person the murderer intended to kill. I cannot see how anybody could have known beforehand that Mr Rinkley would be taken ill and that therefore Mr Bourton would play Pyramus and kill himself with the substituted dagger.”

“I’m still most surprised that we needed an understudy at all. Rinkley must have thought he was at death’s door when those wretched bivalve molluscs reacted, or he would have crawled back on stage, chance what,” said Jonathan.

“Whereas, thanks to Dr Delahague’s morbid concern with myelotoxin, he was bundled off to hospital. I note—I looked her up, of course—that she worked in the north of England before she and her husband came down here, so although it was likely that Rinkley merely had an allergy about which he ought to have known, there was just the chance of myelotoxin from the mussels, so, as a conscientious medical practitioner, she decided to take no chances.”

Jonathan studied his small, spare aunt for almost a minute. She accepted the scrutiny and awaited the verdict with a reptilian smile.

“You’ve got some reason for going all on about those mussels and Jeanne-Marie’s reactions, haven’t you?” said her nephew. “What’s cooking?”

“Only the fleetest of idle thoughts. It occurred to me that, so quickly did Dr Delahague remove the allergist from the scene that he could have had no idea that Bourton was to take on the part of Pyramus.”

“So you have already said, Aunt, but he *must* have had *more* than an idea. He *knew* Bourton was to be his understudy.”

“I wish I could be sure of that. Were all the principal parts covered?”

“Well, more or less. Of course, from one point of view the workmen’s play was our big number, so if the worst came to the worst I suppose we should have scrubbed some of the court party in that scene—telescoped the quips and interpolations, I mean—and Tom and I would have filled in for Pyramus, Prologue or Lion, Emma for Moonshine and Barbara Bourton for Thisbe, leaving Wall for Valerie Yorke. That would have left Brian Yorke as Theseus, and young Jasper Lynn to intone all the responses. Of course, not all—probably not more than *one* —of the workmen would have had to cry off, but, yes, all the parts were more or less covered, and in the earlier scenes, too, although everybody was keeping their fingers crossed, for we all hoped that nobody would have to double up for the lovers, who had much the longest parts in the show.”

“How did Mr and Mrs Yorke get on with the other players?”

“Excellently, so far as I know, but, of course, Deb and I are strangers here. Yorke seems to be the company’s regular producer and always picks himself an attractive although usually a secondary part. Valerie is quite a good actress but, for these days, rather strait-laced, and I believe it was on her insistence that Yorke kicked Rinkley out of his house.”

“And you—but not on Deborah’s insistence—punched Rinkley in the stomach, I understand.”

“Just one of those reflex actions.”

“But probably deeply resented.”

“He did ask for it.”

“And seems to have learned little from it.”

“Oh, you don’t know Valerie Yorke. If Rinkley had so much as tickled Yolanda in the ribs he would have been out on his ear the next minute.”

“And quite right, too,” said Deborah. “It’s abominable of people to take advantage of children. You know, Aunt Adela, if I were asked to name the likeliest person to have changed over those daggers I would have no hesitation in picking any one of four.”

“Would you not? You refer, no doubt, to Mrs Robina Lester, her son David, Miss Susan Hythe and Miss Caroline Frome. You have a point. As we have agreed, their properties were on the same table as those of Rinkley and Mr Lynn. There is only one difficulty. At least two of the four, and possibly three of them, would have had to be in collusion if the substitution of the daggers was to go unnoticed by the rest of the cast.”

“Well,” said Jonathan, “all I know is that all four had had the rough side of Rinkley’s tongue at rehearsals when he thought they weren’t giving him enough support. Yorke told me that the women, in particular, had made so many complaints that if he could have found anybody else even half as good as Rinkley, we should have had another Bully Bottom in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. As it was, Yorke had to let a lot of things go on against his better judgment.”

“Could Mr Yorke not control his leading man?”

“It’s a tricky business producing for amateurs, and Rinkley really was damned good.”

“Suppose there had been collusion—”

“Oh, that’s easy to answer,” said Jonathan. “It could have been mother and son—Robina is a strong-minded woman and I should think David is pretty much under her thumb—or David and one of the girls. He’s supposed to be keen on one of them, but which one I’ve never been interested enough to find out.”

“But Miss Hythe and Miss Frome would not have conspired together?”

“I shouldn’t think so. They’ve probably both got an eye on young David. They wouldn’t go into any sort of huddle with one another.”

“They’ve both got an eye on Tom,” said Deborah.

“I accept your judgment. That leaves us with Barbara Bourton, who would

seem to gain financially from her husband's death. Money is a strong incentive to commit a crime."

"But she was never in any position to change over the daggers, Aunt dear. She had no props to pick up, had no access to the daggers before the show opened and would have been spotted at once if she'd been seen—as she would have been—fiddling about on one of the trestle tables," said Jonathan.

"Edmund seems a bit sniffly this morning," said Laura. "He may have picked up one of these summer colds."

"Cook says stuff a cold and starve a fever," said Rosamund.

"She is full of these old saws. An old saw," added Laura quickly, "is a saying handed down from generation to generation and probably quite as sensible as anything the doctors tell you."

"Will Edmund have the doctor?"

"I don't know until I've taken his temperature."

"I think Cook and Carrie always have colds."

"Oh? What makes you think so?"

"They are always eating. Mummy says they eat twice as much as the rest of us put together."

"Compensatory, perhaps. That means it may be their way of expressing dissatisfaction with something else in their lives."

"Mr Rinkley was eating some nasty things out of a jar. They had kind of orange-coloured bits on them."

"When was this?"

"At the play. Auntie Deb had dressed Edmund and me and Ganymede and Lucien in our fairy clothes, so while she went into the bedroom to get herself and Uncle Jon ready, I thought I would go into the hall and see whether Signora had got Peasblossom ready, because that was going to be my part until I was given a much better one. I thought I would tell her she might get a bouquet if she did nicely the third time."

"You think of everything."

"Yes, you have to, with Edmund, because he is so naughty. Are boys always naughtier than girls?"

"I think they have to be. The onus is on them in so many ways, biologically and otherwise."

"What's an onus?"

"According to the dictionary, it's a duty, a responsibility."

"Is this year a leap year?"

“Why?”

“Cook says if every year was a leap year there would be a lot more happy marriages and not so many divorces.”

“She may have got something there.”

“Why?”

“Because in leap year women do the proposing.”

“I am going to marry Peter when I grow up. Peter said to Mr Rinkley was he really going to eat that muck just before the show and Mr Rinkley said the orange-looking things had a lot of eye-deen in them. Mummy put eyedeens on a nasty deep cut Daddy made on his hand with a chisel and Daddy danced about and swore.”

“Iodine. Yes, I daresay he did. Did Mr Rinkley eat the whole of the contents of the jar?”

“Oh, yes, with a long pickle-fork Cook lent him. I watched him, but he didn’t see me. He ate the whole jar.”

“No wonder he made himself sick.”

“Ganymede showed me how to make myself sick with two fingers down my throat, but it looked horrid, so I didn’t try it.”

“Did Ganymede try it?”

“Oh, yes, he had to when he showed me, but Auntie Deb didn’t know, because it was right at the end of the garden, so nobody saw Ganymede being sick. He said if you were poisoned it was a good thing to know. Ganymede is going to be a doctor when he grows up, like his mummy and daddy.”

“So, for what it’s worth, if anything,” said Laura to Dame Beatrice over the telephone that evening, “it looks as though Rinkley provided the mussels himself and ate them at an unusual time. Edmund? Oh, he’s all right, lively as a cricket tonight. No, no temperature. Not to worry. Rosamund has been prancing about in a white frock, on to which I sewed a red cross, and I made her a nurse’s cap out of one of Gavin’s handkerchiefs. Yes, he’s been here and is most interested in the murder. No, he doesn’t call it that, but he says it might be as well to get you to look into it and he has got in touch with the Chief Constable down there and suggested that they get you involved.”

“I am involved already. A number of Mr Yorke’s actors—perhaps I should say actresses, since all but one are women—have asked for interviews. The rumours and the newspaper reports are making Mr Bourton’s death into a local *cause célèbre* and murder with malice aforethought is a theme on everybody’s tongue.”

“Shall you see them?”

“Oh, yes. Mr Lynn wanted to employ me, so I refused the commission, but there is no reason why I should not amuse myself.”

Chapter 12

Six Characters in Search of a Psychiatrist

“Helen, to you our minds we will unfold.”



The first visitor Dame Beatrice received was Barbara Bourton. Her big show, she said, opened in the autumn. Meanwhile there was all this wretched business about Donald.

“I am mobbed, Dame Beatrice, positively mobbed. One might as well be Royalty or the Pope. Everybody wants my opinion as to what happened. As though I should know any more than anybody else! Usually I court publicity because of my art, but this is more like persecution than publicity.”

“Could you leave the neighbourhood for a few weeks? This kind of excitement soon dies down when there is nothing for it to feed on.”

“There are reasons why I can’t go into hiding. There has been a great deal of speculation about my married life and I don’t want to look as though I’m running away from gossiping tongues. Then there is the adjourned inquest. Goodness knows when the police will want to resume it and goodness knows why they wanted it adjourned, but I suppose they know their own business. When it is resumed I suppose I shall be wanted. Another thing is that there is a lot of business to be cleared up in connection with Donald’s turf interests and, of course, his will has to be proved and probate granted.”

“I am interested to hear that you saw no need for the inquest to be adjourned.”

“I was amazed when the police stepped in like that. I am sure the coroner was only too ready to give a verdict of accidental death, because that is all it was.”

“How, then, do you account for the changeover of the daggers?”

“Donald was hasty and careless. It seems to me obvious what happened. The theatrical dagger fell out of the belt when the props were dumped on the trestle tables before the show started and it got kicked under the table when people came milling around to pick up their bits for that last scene. When Donald had to

change out of Oberon's things and get into the white tunic and armour as Pyramus, I suppose he realised there was no dagger in the belt. He saw this extra one on the table and concluded it was the retractable dagger. It wouldn't occur to him to test it, of course. He always did take things for granted."

"But there is no evidence that this extra dagger was among the properties. Mr Lynn has declared that it formed no part of his collection."

"Oh, of course Marcus Lynn will say that now, but at the dress rehearsal he had a whole armoury on show. Why shouldn't one or two of the things have been gathered up with the rest of the props?"

"Mr Yorke helped to carry the things down from the house to the wings, you know. Would not he or Marcus Lynn have noticed an extra dagger?"

"Oh, Brian Yorke would back up anything Marcus said. He was in the seventh heaven over the money Marcus spilt out on the production, although the play was only meant as a vehicle for poor Emma, the very last woman to want to be in the public eye."

"Did you feel surprise at being offered the less attractive part of Helena?"

"Oh, that soon put itself right, anyway. No, I didn't mind accepting Helena. When Marcus first offered it I said that, as a professional, I would have to be paid. He told me to name my own price, which I did, never thinking he would meet it, but he agreed without a quiver. I'd have done him Puss in Boots or the Hunchback of Notre Dame for even half the money, if he'd asked me."

"I wonder he took the risk of offering you a part which was bound to put his wife in the shade."

"Oh, I expect he has the most inflated ideas of poor Emma's capabilities. Dame Beatrice, we are only skating round the reason I asked to come and see you."

"You used the word 'persecution'. Was that, perhaps, an exaggerated way of expressing yourself?"

"No, it wasn't. Apart from being terrified of going outside my own front door because of gaping sightseers, I've begun receiving some very personal and unpleasant anonymous letters."

"Dear me! I sympathise, but that sort of thing is a matter for the police. Turn the letters over to them."

"I don't believe they would be interested. The letters contain innuendoes, but not threats. Couldn't *you* find out who is sending them and get them stopped?"

"Do they all come from the same person?"

"If I knew that, I could deal with them myself, I suppose. I don't know

whether they all come from the same person, but I don't suppose they do. I could give you some likely names, but I wouldn't know which of them to pick out. Donald was quite promiscuous, and there might be people who think they have a right to some of his money. The letters all harp on the way I gain by his death."

"Forgive my asking, but is there any substance in what the letters suggest?"

Barbara Bourton shrugged shoulders which had been admired in Restoration comedy. She spread her hands in a gesture which belonged wholly to the stage.

"People will believe anything about an actress," she said. "The idea that we're no better than we should be dies hard."

"I do not think you have answered my question. I am in much the same position as a defending counsel, you know. Unless the client is prepared to tell me the whole truth, my hands are tied."

"I thought a psychiatrist could deduce the whole truth, whether she were told it or not."

"If that is a challenge, my dear Mrs Bourton, I do not accept it. Your gage lies on the ground and I shall not pick it up."

Barbara Bourton shrugged her shoulders again.

"Well, perhaps I'm relieved that you won't joust with me," she said. "There is this much truth in the letters. I do inherit everything which Donald had to leave. Who had a better right to it than I? We didn't see as much of one another as most married people do, as our interests were widely different and often kept us apart. I knew all about his 'little friends' and I never made a fuss about what he did or with whom, and he never questioned what I was up to, either. What's more, he always sent flowers to the theatre on my first and last nights. I appreciated that, and it stopped a lot of tongues wagging, I expect."

"I cannot understand why the anonymous letters upset you. You say they are not scurrilous and you have given me no reason to suppose that you are being blackmailed."

"They are hurtful and I want them stopped."

"Have you kept the letters?"

"Good heavens, no! They disturbed me very much. All I wanted was to get rid of them."

"If you get any more, you had better let the police see them, as I said. That is the best advice I can give you."

"I suppose you can't give me the name of a handwriting expert?"

"Yes, of course I can, but all he would be able to tell you is whether all the letters were written by the same hand. You would have to produce far more

written evidence than the letters themselves if a name is to be put to the sender.”

“The letters are typewritten but are all signed in my husband’s name and, if I didn’t know he was dead, I could swear that I recognise his signature. It’s the one he used before we were married and when I suppose we thought we cared for one another. The letters must come from a woman who thinks she was in love with him and expected him to cut me out of his will in her favour. The letters rather harp on the theme that Donald died before he had time to change his will.”

“Have you asked his solicitor whether any such change was under contemplation?”

“No, I never thought of that. It’s a bit two-edged, though, isn’t it?”

“You mean it is just possible that your husband *had* had some such project in mind?”

“I think it’s as well that I don’t know whether he had or not, but, honestly, I don’t think he would have done the dirty on me. He was a decent sort in his way.”

“How do you regard your husband’s death, Mrs Bourton?”

“How do you mean?”

“You have given me the impression that you think it was accidental, the result of his haste to change his costume at very short notice.”

“What could it have been but accidental? Of course it was! Donald wouldn’t have committed suicide and who on earth would want to murder him? He was a philanderer, but the only person who had any right to object to that was myself, and I certainly never did. So long as he didn’t attempt to interfere in my career, that was all that I cared about. Will you give me the name of the handwriting expert?”

“Yes, but I warn you that he has no official standing. He is, in fact, a retired forger who now makes a living as a not too scrupulous ‘private eye’.”

“Oh, really, Dame Beatrice! I did not come here for you to make a monkey out of me!”

“Nothing is further from my thoughts. Forget all about a handwriting expert. Take my advice and go to the police.”

The next caller was Rinkley. Jonathan was at the front of the house cutting some roses and laying them in the trug which Deborah was holding when the visitor arrived.

“You want to see Dame Beatrice? Is she expecting you?” Jonathan enquired. “Anyway, come in and have a drink. Glad to see you up and about again. When

did they discharge you from hospital?"

"Oh, days ago. I didn't ask for an appointment with Dame Beatrice because I didn't know until this morning that she was staying with you. Did she see the show, by any chance?"

"Yes, the Thursday performance."

"Oh, not on the Saturday? I say, Bradley, what a frightful thing! Poor old Bourton! How do you think it happened, for God's sake?"

"I have no idea. I suppose you know the police have asked for an adjournment of the inquest?"

"I'm not in the least surprised. What happened definitely ought *not* to have happened. I'm an interested party, of course, because if it hadn't been Donald, it would have been me."

"Surely not? The minute you drew it out you would have known you'd got hold of the wrong dagger."

"I doubt it, you know. I really do. After all, I had struck myself shrewd blows with it on the Thursday and Friday and I think I would have followed suit on the Saturday without a thought. I've seen the pictures the police and the media are putting out, and the dagger looks so like the retractable one that anybody would be deceived."

"No," said Jonathan, as they went into the house, "the blade was much shorter. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Scotch?"

"Thanks very much."

"I'll go and find out whether Aunt Adela is busy," said Deborah. "She is probably writing up her notes on Barbara Bourton."

"Barbara? Has she been here?" asked Rinkley.

"Yesterday and stayed to tea, but not until the two of them had had a prolonged *tête-à-tête*."

"Good heavens! I wonder what it was about? I haven't been to see Barbara. Didn't like to butt in. I expect she's pretty sore with me because I suppose that if I hadn't eaten those damned mussels she would still have a husband."

"Ah, yes, the mussels," said Deborah. "Do you usually eat them between meals?"

Rinkley, who was about to raise his glass, lowered it again.

"Eat them between meals?" he said.

"I was told that you speared those mussels out of a jar with a pickle-fork while you were waiting to go on stage."

"Oh, that! As a matter of fact, I was advised to eat the damn things. I caught

some kind of throat infection and on Saturday morning I was so thick in the clear, as my old nanny used to call it, that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to take the stage. Well, I went for a gargle to my local and confided in the landlord. He told me I needed either half-a-dozen raw eggs or some oysters just before the performance. I couldn't face the raw eggs, and I couldn't locate any oysters, so I stopped at the delicatessen counter in the supermarket and settled for the mussels, with the dire results we all know."

"Ah, here *is* Aunt Adela," said Deborah, on her way to the door just as it opened and Dame Beatrice came in.

"Mr Rinkley, Aunt Adela," said Jonathan. "Aunt, dear, 'this man is Pyramus, if you would know'."

"Whereas this far from beauteous lady is certainly not Thisbe," said Dame Beatrice, leering hideously at the visitor. "So am I to hear of more anonymous letters?"

Rinkley, who had risen at her entrance, took advantage of the example she set and seated himself as Jonathan and Deborah left them alone together.

"Anonymous letters?" he said. "How did you know I had them?"

"I expect most of the cast have had them by now," she replied. "It would be the normal thing to expect under the circumstances. Of what do yours accuse you?"

"Well, not of anything in particular."

"You mean they consist of what the aspiring journalist told the editor that he was good at?"

"Sorry. I don't get you."

"I have contracted a bad habit from my secretary, who is apt to quote from readings sacred, profane, popular and esoteric, and I have caught the virus. The journalist told the editor that he was good at what he called 'general invective'. I wondered whether 'general invective' would describe the contents of the anonymous letters you have received."

"Oh, well, actually, no. I mean, so far as the wording is concerned, there's nothing I couldn't show my maiden aunt."

"Oh, have you a maiden aunt? I thought they went out of fashion in about the year 1947. Well, if the wording of the letters was not objectionable in itself, of what did the letters complain?"

"They didn't. They simply asked a lot of impertinent questions. Now, Dame Beatrice, I don't claim to be a saint—"

"I doubt whether you could sustain the rôle if you did make such a claim."

Did you owe money to Mr Bourton?"

"Oh, look here, now! I came in the hope that with my knowing Jon and the lovely Deborah and all that, you would grant me a serious interview. I didn't owe Bourton anything. I didn't even know he was to be my understudy. Look here, now, if I sent you the letters, could you trace the writer? It must be somebody who knows me pretty well, and that means I probably know *her* pretty well. I could give you a list of possible people."

"Give it to the police. It is not my province to trace the writers of anonymous letters."

"Oh, well, that's that, then. One thing everybody knows is that I had nothing against Bourton or anyone else. I haven't spoken to any of the cast since I came out of hospital, so I know nothing about the inquest except what I read in the papers. Were you present?"

"I was."

"Do you know why the police asked to have it adjourned?"

"For the usual reasons, I suppose."

"You mean—you don't mean they think there was something fishy about Bourton's death?"

"The fact that the cast are beginning to receive anonymous letters indicates that the police are not the only people who think that a more detailed enquiry into the death is called for—more detailed, I mean, than has been the case so far."

"But surely what happened to Bourton must have been the sheerest accident? Nobody could have foreseen that there would be that mix-up of daggers."

"And, of course, Mr Bourton could not have foreseen that you would be taken ill and that he would be called upon to take over your part. You are being disingenuous, Mr Rinkley. Do you or do you not believe that Mr Bourton's death was deliberately planned?"

Rinkley stood up.

"If it was, it must have been planned for me, not him," he said. "Well, Dame Beatrice, I am sorry to have wasted your time. When I read in the papers that you were in residence here and learned of your official position, I'm afraid I took it for granted that you were here to assist the members of the cast."

"But not to look for anonymous letter-writers, Mr Rinkley."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I rather put my foot in it there. I thought, well, psychiatry and all that, you know. Did you notice, by the way, that I spoke of *her*!"

“The writers of anonymous letters are more often women than men. You indicated, I think, that the letters asked questions, but did not utter threats. Was there a hint of blackmail in any of the questions?”

“Blackmail? Good gracious, if there was, I did not recognise it as such. How could anybody attempt to blackmail *me*?”

“If you do not know, you can hardly expect me to put forward any suggestions. Did I not hear that your wife has an antiques business?”

“She isn’t my wife any longer, and if you think there is any tie-up between her shop and that stupid business of the substitute dagger—Oh, hey, now! Wait a minute! That must be what one of the letters was hinting at. Oh, well, it’s quite a ridiculous surmise on somebody’s part. I’ll show the police that particular letter and they can go to the shop and turn darling Veda inside out. That ought to settle matters. The very last thing she would do is to aid and abet me in getting rid of Bourton. Besides, I thought Jonathan was to be my stand-in, so owing money to Bourton wouldn’t enter into it.”

The next contact which Dame Beatrice had with members of the cast did not take place at Jonathan’s temporary home, but at the house of Brian and Valerie Yorke. After dinner, for which Yolanda, in primrose-coloured silk and a simple gold pendant belonging to her mother, had been allowed a seat at table, the child was packed off and the adults settled down to coffee, brandy and gossip.

The talk turned inevitably to Bourton’s death and Yorke remarked that Barbara had had a bad time of it, what with police and reporters and the morbid curiosity of everybody who knew her, whether intimately or only by sight.

“I’ve had a fairly sticky time myself since they adjourned the inquest,” went on Brian. “That’s why Val and I are glad of a word with Dame Beatrice.”

“We’ve had our share, too,” said Jonathan. “You wouldn’t think people would have the nerve to infiltrate our garden and look for the spot marked X, but they have. I’m thinking of asking for a policeman with a dog. Aunt Adela has had problems, too.”

“Not problems,” said Dame Beatrice. “I have merely been faced with the necessity for practising a certain amount of Pontius Pilatery.”

“Washing your hands?” said Valerie Yorke, trying not to look disapproving of this reference to Holy Writ. “But of what?”

“Anonymous letters. Some of your acquaintances seem to confuse psychiatry with necromancy and imagine that I can summon spirits from the vasty deep and find out from them who writes the letters.”

“I expect Barbara has had some,” said Valerie. “She gets all the money, you

know. May I ask—?”

“Certainly. I also had a visit from Mr Rinkley.”

“He came here,” said Brian, “and did everything except actually sob on my neck. Mind you, to be fair to the chap, I’m sure he is genuinely upset by Bourton’s death. The very last thing he would have anticipated, he said, and the dagger which did all the damage could have been intended for him. The awkward part of it is that, disentangling what he *said* from what I’m sure he *meant*, there’s a certain amount of backing for his opinion.”

This opinion, carefully repeated by Brian while Valerie, Dame Beatrice noticed, sat forward in her chair with her hands twisting together, was that the exchange of daggers had been affected by Susan Hythe and Caroline Frome acting in collusion. Both had had good and legitimate reason for approaching the tables which held the properties, both had a grievance against Rinkley for his sharp comments on their acting and against Bourton for his embarrassing advances to them off-stage during the earlier rehearsals. “So they could have plotted against him, I suppose,” Yorke said in conclusion.

“I don’t believe it,” said Deborah. “Two young office girls? The most they would have plotted was to make Rinkley look a fool when he drew out the wrong dagger and realised he dared not use it on himself the way he had rehearsed. I don’t believe they would have thought even of that, as a matter of fact.”

“Brian had to speak to Bourton about his conduct off-stage. The girls complained,” said Valerie.

“They also complained about Rinkley’s comments on their acting,” said Brian. “Mind you, he was justified, in a way. They made very inferior stooges for a man with his dramatic ability. The fellow ought to be a professional. I don’t believe those girls really had anything against Donald. Girls may get scared and rear up a bit when an older man makes a determined pass at them (although I should hardly think it would worry them nowadays), but they must feel a bit flattered, all the same. The sort of reaction they would have when their reading of the script was unkindly knocked by a chap who, after all, was neither the director nor the producer, would be a very different matter and might go very deep indeed. Don’t you think so, Dame Beatrice? I am referring to Rinkley’s comments on their acting.”

“It might settle the matter if Dame Beatrice would have a word with the girls,” said Valerie. “She may disclaim an ability (which I am sure, all the same, she possesses) to track down the writer of anonymous letters, but I am sure a

psychiatrist of her eminence can turn two gormless girls inside out in the space of a single interview.”

“You flatter me, Mrs Yorke,” said Dame Beatrice, “but now that the police have co-opted me officially—I was informed of this a day or two ago—I have my own reasons for finding a talk with Miss Hythe and Miss Frome desirable. I wonder, Mr Yorke, whether you will assist me in a small matter? First, were the properties arranged on the trestle tables in exactly the same way at all three performances?”

Brian assured her that they were. He had tried to have no halts between scenes except for what he called ‘the children’s interval’ during which the fairies were taken out of their costumes, dressed in their own clothes and returned by Signora Moretti and her helpers to their mothers, either to sit out the remainder of the performance or to be taken home.

“So after Bottom returns to Quince’s house (a bit we had to leave out on the last night), the workmen had to snatch up their bits of gear, Pyramus had to make a change of tunic and get his armour on, Thisbe had to get into her skirt and mantle, and the whole set of them had to cross behind the backdrop and get themselves on to the prompt side so that the court party could enter from the O.P. side. Of the court party, only Valerie, as Hippolyta, had to make a complete change of costume out of Diana’s tunic and buskins back to her former Elizabethan trappings, but Emma, Barbara and Deborah were all on hand to help her, and I had done my best to make sure that everything needed was to hand to save delay.”

Rinkley’s props had been given a table to themselves. There was the ass’s head, as well as the gear for Pyramus. Valerie also had her own table in her woodland tent so that her Tudor garments could be exchanged as expeditiously as possible for the things she wore in the hunting scene and back again for the last scene. The only other articles on her table were the dashing boots which Brian, as Theseus, wore in the same scene. The tables in the wings held the rest of the clutter for the workmen’s play.

“I had forgotten the donkey’s head,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Is it important?” enquired Valerie Yorke nervously.

“Not in the least, although, as the child said of a gas mask in the last war, ‘it kind of suits some people, don’t it?’ ” Dame Beatrice replied.

When Jonathan opened the front door for his party on their arrival home that evening, he picked up an envelope which had been pushed through the letter-box. It was typewritten and was addressed to Dame Beatrice. She read the letter

inside and observed that it was a cry from the heart. It came from Susan Hythe, and the substance of it was that she and Caroline Frome had read all about Dame Beatrice in the newspapers and would be very grateful indeed if they might come and see her. They were extremely worried by 'things which are being said about us and the inquest being adjourned and all that, so do please let us come'.

The girls were left in the hall by Emma Lynn, who had brought them along.

"They have been given time off from work to come and see you. So kind of you," said Emma, her plain face flushing and the colour enhancing her looks.

"They are extremely worried, poor things, and no wonder."

"Anonymous letters?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"No, telephone calls put through to my husband's local office where they work as typists. The calls are dealt with now by the supervisor, but the girls are still apprehensive. Their lives have been threatened. Marcus dismisses the threats as coming from what he calls 'some screwball', and I expect he's right, but girls of their age are very impressionable and their alarm is very real. We are all still suffering from the shock of Donald's death and unfortunately the girls had been heard to say that they wished he would drop dead. Not that they meant it, of course. It is just an expression, but people remember these things."

"I do not know that I can help them. I have already been approached by Mrs Bourton and Mr Rinkley and have spoken with Mr and Mrs Yorke. There have been some unpleasant anonymous letters, but those are a commonplace under circumstances of this sort. Do the telephone calls come from a man or a woman?"

"It is difficult to say. The supervisor, who has taken two of the calls, thinks that the voice is disguised."

"What do the girls think?"

"I have not asked them. If the supervisor is right, it means that the girls would recognise the voice if it were not disguised, don't you think?"

"One of their workmates playing a cruel practical joke on them?"

"I hardly think so. Instant dismissal would be the penalty for that, once the joker was unmasked. I think it must be some member of the cast."

"It is obviously somebody who knows where the girls are employed, but no doubt a good many people would know that. Cases of murder always throw up these 'screwballs', as your husband calls them. They soon give up their fun, but it is very uncomfortable for their victims while it lasts, and young girls are especially vulnerable. I shall be interested to hear what they have to say."

So Deborah entertained Emma in the drawing-room while Dame Beatrice

interviewed Susan and Caroline in the library.

Chapter 13

Cut Down to Size

“So quick, bright things come to confusion.”



Poor kids! It's a shame that they should be involved. Mind you, they are not the only people to be upset, apart from the recipients of anonymous letters. When the inquest was adjourned, what tickled me was the obvious surprise and displeasure of the coroner. He was all ready with his cosy little verdict of death by misadventure,” said Jonathan. “I don't suppose this borough has had a case of murder on its books since the old smuggling days, and he didn't strike me as the kind of man who would want to break the record. Did the girls tell you anything useful at all?”

“No. They suggested—a ploy which must have been agreed on because I interviewed them separately and both of them mentioned it—that I should put them under hypnosis.”

“Whatever for?”

“So that they could convince me that they had no hand in Donald Bourton's death.”

“Good heavens! Whatever next?”

“They *did* convince me of one thing. When Rinkley was taken ill, they fully expected that you, and not Donald Bourton, would take Pyramus upon you. They stressed that, although Bourton had made himself somewhat objectionable to them in certain ways, and Rinkley had done the same in certain other ways, they had nothing against *you* at all, and certainly had no reason to wish you harm.”

“Fair enough. Beyond the general greetings at rehearsals and so forth, I doubt whether I ever spoke to them at all, and I don't suppose they *did* know that Bourton, and not I, was to stand-in for Rinkley. Why should anybody have bothered to mention it to them? Once our cocktail party was over, I don't suppose any of our guests gave the alteration another thought until Rinkley was actually laid low.”

“That brings us to another point. Unless one of the others told him, Rinkley

himself did not know that Mr Bourton and not yourself was to be made his understudy. So much I had already had clear in my mind, so what it comes to is that the only people who were present when the change of understudy was suggested and agreed on were Marcus and Emma Lynn, yourself and Deborah, Brian and Valerie Yorke and Donald and Barbara Bourton. Those who were not told at the time and who may or may not have picked up the information later, are Tom and Peter Woolidge, Robina and David Lester, young Jasper Lynn, Rinkley himself, Susan Hythe and Caroline Frome. I leave out the children and am prepared to leave out Peter. The boy could have had no conceivable interest, so far as I can tell, in who would substitute for Rinkley should a substitute be called for, but Jasper may have heard something from his parents, so he cannot be ruled out.”

“Well, that’s got everybody pegged out on the line,” said Jonathan, “so now, I suppose, you’ll take a closer look at those who knew of the alteration.”

“Useless, until we get some evidence. I have little hope of the antiques dealers. The purchase of the rapier-dagger may have been made years ago and not necessarily in this neighbourhood. The conversion of the rapier into a dagger may offer more scope. The newspapers now report that it was done recently.”

“You have taken Peter Woolidge and possibly Jasper Lynn off your list, but what about David Lester? He is only about their age—well, Peter’s age—you know. Doesn’t he qualify to be let off the hook?”

“I understand from the two young women that his mother had been roughly spoken to by Rinkley and that the young man was also very angry when the girls told him about Bourton’s conduct off-stage with them.”

“So whether Rinkley or Bourton was the intended victim, you are keeping David very much in the picture. He had reason to dislike both men.”

“Yes, but he may have thought Jonathan was to be the understudy. However, he was one of the workmen and, as Lion, had access to the tables which held the properties.”

“Well, so had his mother and the two girls, come to that. I suppose that’s why you have kept them on your list, but I don’t suppose for a moment that they had anything to do with changing over the daggers, you know,” said Deborah. “They wouldn’t nurse that sort of grudge.”

The next visitor was the Chief Constable of the county. He, too, had received a letter, but not directly and it was not anonymous. It had been sent to the local police station and had been handed to the Chief Constable by the superintendent with the remark, “One for Dame Beatrice, perhaps, sir, now that she has been co-

opted on to the strength.” The letter ran:

“I don’t suppose it’s what you are looking for, as my shop is twenty miles from your town, but I sold a rapier to a young lad about six weeks ago, and the hilt looks a little bit like the hilt of the one in your picture which came on the TV last night after the late news, also an incised letter or two on the blade, but not very distinct in your picture. I do not usually bother with the late news, having seen it earlier and liking an early bedtime, but if I could see the dagger you have I might be able to identify it. I sold it to a young lad as a rapier which he said was for theatricals. I warned him to be careful, as it was Toledo steel and made for real use. I was surprised he had the money to buy it.”

The letter was signed Tessa Wells and was sent from an address in the little town of Saxonchurch which was indeed about twenty miles off and lay between broad, lazy rivers which meandered through meadow-lands and past what had been a monastery before the Dissolution. The rivers eventually found their way into the enormous, shallow bay overlooked by Jonathan’s temporary home.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything in it,” said the Chief Constable, referring to the information in the letter, “but in a puzzling case of this kind I suppose we must catch at straws. The Super thinks so, anyway, and so does Conway, I gather.”

“A puzzling case?” said Dame Beatrice.

“Yes, because, so far as I can see, it could be a case of accident, suicide or murder. You pays your money and you takes your choice.”

“Oh, I choose murder. The substitution of the lethal dagger for that with the retractable blade was no accident, although there is a distinct possibility that it did not kill the person it was intended to kill. Suicide, from all that I have been told, seems unlikely. Incidentally, this woman’s reference to theatricals may be important if she identifies the lethal weapon and can describe the customer who purchased the rapier.”

“It’s a very long shot, don’t you think?”

“Yes, indeed. However, I shall be interested to meet this shopkeeper. There is only one young man on our books who is still a schoolboy and interested, to some extent, in amateur theatricals, but there are two others, not so much older, who took part in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

“But what reason would any of these boys have had to murder Rinkley, Bourton, or your nephew?”

“No reason at all except, perhaps, for young David Lester. He may have felt resentment at the way Rinkley had insulted his mother’s stagecraft and at the way Bourton had attempted to take advantage of two young women in whom he seems to have taken an interest, his fellow Thespians Susan Hythe and Caroline Frome, both of whom have been to see me.”

“Have you met David Lester?”

“No. I shall make a point of speaking with him before I go to Saxonchurch.”

“As I see it, he would have had as much opportunity as anybody else to change over the daggers.”

“His lion-skin was on a table with the rest of the properties, it is true, but I adhere to my theory that the daggers were changed over before the play opened on the third night. I have my reasons for thinking so and I have not changed my mind, although I am willing to be convinced.”

Young David Lester, fresh-faced and looking less than his twenty-two years, was employed in a bank, but not at the branch of which his father was manager. He lived with his parents and his mother had answered Detective-Inspector Conway’s telephone call.

“You want to bring Dame Beatrice to see David? But why?” Robina had enquired. Conway’s answer had not reassured her and she admitted the visitors in a reserved manner which indicated that she regarded their advent as an intrusion.

“I don’t know how you think David can help you,” she said.

“We don’t suppose he can,” said Conway, “but Dame Beatrice has talked to most of the actors and wouldn’t wish to leave anybody out.”

“She has left *me* out, for a start.”

“If you can convince me that you had any reason to wish Mr Bourton dead,” began Dame Beatrice, pausing for an instant. Robina took up the challenge.

“Of course I hadn’t, and neither had David,” she said. “You will get nothing out of him because he knows nothing. Why has the inquest been adjourned? That’s what I’d like to know. Donald’s death was the result of a stupid accident due to somebody’s carelessness. Why couldn’t they leave it at that?”

“Because carelessness which results in somebody’s death calls for investigation,” said Dame Beatrice. David Lester, who had come into the room, said quietly,

“All right, mother. I can handle this. I’ve nothing to hide.” He eyed Dame Beatrice with interest, but without apprehension, as his mother went out of the room. “Won’t you sit down?” he said politely. “You think Bourton was

murdered, don't you? You've seen Susan and Caroline, I hear. I can't tell you anything more than they did. My things were on the same table as theirs and my mother's props. Mrs Yorke's things were all in a tent in the woods because, to change for the hunting-scene and then back again, she had to strip practically starkers, which she could hardly do in full view of the rest of the cast."

"When do you suppose the exchange of daggers was made?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"As though I have any idea! My view, for what it's worth, is that the harmless dagger fell out of its belt when the clearing-up was done after the second performance and got kicked under the table, so, when Bourton had to take on the part, he realised there was no dagger and simply picked up the one that was lying there, thinking it was the retractable one."

"That point has been made before, Mr Lester, but why should there have been another dagger, and a lethal one, so handy? That is why we suspect murder. Besides, if the dagger was lying on one of the tables, presumably it was in full view of all those who had reason to approach the tables, yet nobody has mentioned it. Are you telling me that you were the only person who saw it there when you collected your lion-skin and mask?"

"No, I didn't see it. I was only offering a rational explanation of how it got into the pocket of Pyramus's belt."

"Well, *that* didn't prove much," said Conway, when they had left the house.

"It went a long way towards proving young Lester's innocence," said Dame Beatrice. "I offered him a tempting chance to say that he had seen the lethal dagger lying on the table, but he did not rise to the bait."

The town of Saxonchurch, still called by its inhabitants a village, was enclosed by earthworks put up on the only bit of high ground between its two rivers. It was otherwise surrounded by watermeadows, and was a pleasant, homely little place reached after a drive along roads which were bordered for miles by rhododendrons. It was the gateway to the wildest and most picturesque part of the locality, a land very different from its own immediate surroundings. It bordered a land of dramatic coastline, great stretches of heath, a castle which had withstood for months the assaults of Cromwell's troops and, not far from the sea, there was the most perfect, unspoiled Norman church in the county.

At Dame Beatrice's suggestion, her own car and not an official police car, had been used for the journey. The detective-inspector drove it and found a parking-space just off the ancient market square. The shop of which he and Dame Beatrice were in quest was in one of the many side-roads which led to the

market-place and it turned out to be a fine example of a small Georgian residence. It had a tympanum arch to the doorway inset with a finely-designed fanlight, but the ground-floor front windows had been altered to make a shop-front.

A middle-aged woman wearing a flowered overall and a number of ornate bracelets came forward as the inspector and Dame Beatrice went in. Dame Beatrice left the preliminaries to her companion.

“Mrs Wells?” he asked. The woman fluttered her hands at him, causing the bracelets to make a not unmelodious jingling sound.

“Oh, you will be the police, “ she said. “Have you brought the rapier?”

“No, madam. It is a valuable piece of evidence and I am not authorised to tote it around the countryside. You will have to identify it at the station.”

“Oh, but I can’t leave the shop.”

“When do you close?”

“At five, if there aren’t any customers, but of course I never turn anybody away.”

“We will come back at five. We are anxious to get the weapon identified.”

“But, as I think I said in my letter, I don’t suppose for a moment that it’s the one you want.”

“Can you give us a description of the purchaser?”

“More or less. He was quite a neatly-dressed well-spoken lad, about eighteen years old, I should think, and might have been five-seven or five-eight tall, a bit taller than I am, but not very much. He was slim-built, with fair hair just touching his collar. He had blue eyes—I noticed them particularly.”

“That’s a very helpful description, madam.”

“Does it fit anybody you’ve got your eye on?”

“Difficult to say at the moment, madam,” said Conway diplomatically, for his compliment had been a false one.

“Was the blade really of Toledo steel?” enquired Dame Beatrice. Tessa Wells smiled and shook her head.

“If the customer had been a collector and knowledgeable, I should never have said such a thing,” she admitted, “but the boy only wanted the rapier for school theatricals and Toledo blades are the only kind the general public have ever heard of except for the modern Wilkinson steel, so I told the lie hoping it would warn him not to go fooling about with the thing. You know what boys are.”

“You indicated in your letter that the purchase was an expensive one.”

“Well, I really thought he was wasting his money, but it wasn’t for me to say so. It’s hard enough to make a living without telling customers how they can do things on the cheap without buying from me. I was a bit suspicious, as a matter of fact, about his claim that he wanted the thing for theatricals. He *seemed* a respectable enough lad, but nowadays, what with their bicycle chains and flick-knives and all the horrors they go in for, you can’t trust any of them, can you?”

“I am myself somewhat of a connoisseuse of arms and armour. Will you give me what perhaps I may term a ‘trade description’ of the rapier?” said Dame Beatrice.

“Yes, if you think you know what I’ll be talking about. It won’t mean much to you if you don’t.” To Dame Beatrice’s amusement, Tessa Wells eyed her distrustfully before she went behind a curtain at the back of the shop and returned with a large ledger which she placed on top of a glass-topped show-case containing snuff-boxes and some ornate rings. There was also a small object on which Dame Beatrice had already fixed an acquisitive eye. “Here we are,” said the shopkeeper, opening the ledger and consulting a neat index. “Lot 20101. Rapier with flat quillons and sideguards ovoid, rather distinctive pommel, acorn button, rewired grip, *ricasso* three inches below quillons, swordsmith’s mark on blade, could be running wolf of Solingen. Overall length forty inches. Length of blade thirty-four inches. German, about 1620 if genuine. *Ex* private collection bombed in last war and sold among other things as salvage.”

“Thank you,” said Dame Beatrice, as Tessa closed the book. “What are you asking for the Babylonian cylinder seal?” She pointed to the tiny object in the show-case.

“That? You can have it for thirty pounds.”

“I think I will offer less. I think that you have little chance of selling it at that price. What does it represent?”

“Date-palms and date harvesting. Do you want me to roll it out for you?”

“Not at the moment, but we will talk again. Where can the inspector and I get some tea?”

“At the bow-fronted shop in the high street nearly opposite the *Lion*.”

“See you again at five, then, madam,” said Conway. “Much obliged for your help, I’m sure.”

At the police station that evening Tessa Wells was hesitant about identifying the weapon because, she said, the hilt had been somewhat altered.

“There was nothing so very special about the rapier itself. I expect they’ve got others like it in the Tower and other museums. They are sure to have a

collection in Gratz and Vienna as well, and probably in the Musée Royal de l'Armée in Brussels, as well as in the Berlin and Solingen collections," she said.

"To name but a few, as my secretary would say," said Dame Beatrice, cackling.

"It does seem a shame to have cut this one down to this miserable sliver," went on the dealer in antiques. "They've only left six inches of the blade and they've polished out the *ricasso*, although you can make out the different colour of the metal."

"This weapon had to go in up to the hilt. It has killed a man, as I suppose you have heard," said Dame Beatrice.

"You wouldn't be bothering me otherwise, would you?"

"When we were in your shop you indicated, I think, that you thought the boy was wasting his money."

"Well, if he only wanted the rapier for theatricals, I don't see why he couldn't have got a carpenter to make him a nice wooden one and painted it silver."

"The hilt might have posed a problem." Dame Beatrice signed to the inspector, who produced the dagger which had the retractable blade. "Tell me, Mrs Wells, if you do not think these hilts look very much alike."

"Well, yes, to an untrained eye, I would agree they do. I'm sorry I can't be positive about my rapier being cut down to this little dagger, but without the rest of the blade I couldn't be sure."

"What would you say if I suggested to you that the lad to whom you sold the rapier was not making the purchase on his own behalf, but was acting for somebody else?"

"For somebody else? But why?"

"Because, perhaps, the interested party did not want to appear in the transaction."

"That boy in my shop seemed a good boy, but could have been got at, I suppose. They'll do anything for money these days."

"You did not recognise him as a local boy?"

"No, but I thought he might have come from a public school and that he was in the school play and wanted to show off a bit with a real rapier."

"There is a public school just outside her town," said the inspector to Dame Beatrice after they had taken Mrs Wells home, "so her idea would be valid enough."

"Could the cutting down have been done in the school metalwork

department?”

“It’s a line I can follow up. We know the date when the lad bought the rapier. Mrs Wells keeps good records.”

“One thing about the purchase surprised me and that is why I suggested that the boy was only an agent in the affair. I was surprised that he appears to have been alone when he bought the rapier. One would have supposed he would have had friends—possibly envious ones—with him when he made such an ostentatious and costly purchase.”

Enquiries at the school produced nothing. The school provided for boys whose hobby was woodwork, but there was no metalwork centre, neither had a school play been under contemplation. “You will appreciate, Inspector, that this is our examination term.”

“So, unless something turns up out of the blue,” said the Chief Constable to Dame Beatrice, “and, as I see it, that means getting our hands on the blacksmith, or whatever, who cut down that rapier, we’re stymied.”

“The antiques dealer came forward; why should the metalworker not decide to do the same?”

“I reckon there’s an answer to that one, ma’am,” said the inspector, who was present at the conference. “While the weapon was sold as a rapier, the dealer could afford to come forward, but whoever cut it down to dagger length might be asked some very awkward questions, don’t you think? Nobody likes getting mixed up with the police, however innocent they are.”

“No doubt you are right, but we need that man.”

“What, ma’am, is a *ricasso*?” asked Conway.

“Oh, a practice begun in the fourteenth century, and extensively used in the sixteenth century, of leaving a few inches at the top of the blade unsharpened, rough and unpolished as a protection to the fingers of the swordsman. The amount of protection was increased in some cases by the provision of a hook or a bar below the quillons, which are these side-pieces which form the cross-hilt of the weapon. In this case, as Mrs Wells saw, the original *ricasso* had been polished and sharpened because in order to sustain the resemblance to the retractable dagger, it was essential that when the actor used it, it should go in right up to the quillons, as the harmless dagger would be expected to do if it were to remain in place after the actor had struck himself with it.”

“You say we need this blacksmith, Dame Beatrice,” said the Chief Constable, “and we most certainly do. One thing, there are not so many independent blacksmiths nowadays.”

“Oh, now we’ve got this far, we shall turn him up sooner or later. It’s just a question of time, sir, and the usual spadework,” said Conway.

“I am hoping that he will not turn himself up,” said Dame Beatrice.

“I thought that’s just what we could do with,” said the Chief Constable. “You said so yourself, didn’t you?”

“I mean that I hope he will not present himself to us in the form of a corpse. I have a feeling that Mrs Wells may have started a landslide by coming to the police with her information about the rapier and I am sure no time should be lost in locating this man who turned it into a dagger. I hope he has sense enough to realise that his own safety may depend upon getting in touch with the authorities as soon as possible.”

“Depends whether he knows what the dagger was to be used for, ma’am,” said Conway. “I wish we could find the rest of the blade. There must be quite a length of it somewhere, if the rapier was the length the lady specified.”

“She refused to identify the dagger as having been part of the rapier she sold,” said Dame Beatrice, “but the circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that it was.”

Chapter 14

Body on the Foreshore

“... and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard.”



Some few miles eastward along the coast there was a resort which served as a place of retirement for the moderately affluent elderly. It had built up a reputation for great respectability and a certain exclusiveness. Bath-chairs had been a feature on the broad promenade and the hotels often had permanent residents who established little cliques among themselves and looked with jaundiced eye on any interlopers who commandeered their favourite armchairs in the lounges.

Both residents and visitors were proud of the town, its health-giving properties, its broad sands, its denes and public gardens, the good taste, range and scope of its entertainments, its balmy air and its interesting hinterland.

Times change, however. Because it was prosperous the town grew, shops and restaurants were added, a sprawl of back streets spread out around the railway station, a large bus station and then a coach station came into being and gradually but inexorably the character of the town altered. With the advent of the motor-coaches came the day trippers; when the motor-car became ubiquitous visitors came who no longer booked in for a week, a fortnight, or a month at the hotels and boarding houses, but required only an overnight stop with breakfast before going their way to the next overnight stop.

The next development was more serious still. The formerly insular, prejudiced, stay-at-home English began to seek holidays abroad. The resort's hotels began to depend more and more on letting their accommodation for political and other conferences, the annual meetings of learned societies, coach parties who would move off on the following morning and who were bitterly resented by even the equally transient birds of passage who had booked privately instead of *en bloc*, and the occasional wedding reception.

Then, on noisy, ton-up motorcycles, helmeted, black-jacketed, witless,

destructive and ruthless, came the Bank Holiday gangs for a short orgy of window-smashing, drunkenness and terrorisation, the modern equivalent of shooting up the town. More frequent nuisances were the local gangs which grew up to combat the invaders and soon infested the back streets. They had their own territories, jealously guarded, which included a favourite pub and a favourite disco, and to enliven life further they made sporadic war on one another, combining only when the motorbike invaders arrived.

However, the town had been free from any major disturbances since the police had had to make a number of arrests on the May Day bank holiday following a bout of shop-window-smashing and insulting behaviour on the part of the invaders, so it was with some surprise that the Superintendent received a report that the stabbed body of a skinhead youth had been found on the foreshore which bordered the busy road to the ferry.

“Must be some sort of gang vengeance,” he said to his uniformed inspector. “We’ve had no trouble for weeks with the local lads. Take a recce and see what you can pick up. Have a comb-out of the pubs these kids use. This kind of thing is usually the result of youngsters having too much to drink.”

The body had been found by two men digging for lug-worms at low tide. When they reported their find they said that the body was a good way further up the shore from where they were looking for bait and they had not noticed it. Later, when they were ready to depart, they did see it and thought at first that it was a heap of flotsam brought in on the tide and left stranded when the tide went out.

However, as it appeared to be neither seaweed nor driftwood, they decided to examine it and were alarmed to find themselves confronted by a very dead youth. It was early in the morning, for they had decided upon a full day’s fishing, so the police got to the spot before any sightseers came along. Spectators were unlikely, anyway, for the foreshore of the inland bay was muddy and uninviting. The beach proper lay on the other side of the road, for the way to the ferry ran along a very narrow peninsula which, on the northern side, had plenty of clean sand, beach huts, a promenade and the waters of the English Channel to attract the visitors. Except to yachtsmen, there was nothing attractive on the other side of the road except the view.

Cars along the road were frequent, for the ferry was always busy, and although pedestrians were few except for those like the two fishermen whose only concern was to dig for bait, the road itself was seldom completely deserted.

“Nasty case in the local rag,” said Jonathan, handing the paper to his aunt.

“Boy of about eighteen found dead on the sea-shore. Been stabbed.”

“Yes, I read the account before breakfast,” said Dame Beatrice, laying the paper aside. “I wonder why that boy who bought the expensive rapier from Mrs Wells comes unbidden into my mind? It seems such an unnecessary proceeding to spend a great deal of money on something which was to be used merely as a stage property. That cannot be the reason it was purchased.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Marcus Lynn did the same thing. Those swords and daggers he brought along for our play must have cost a tidy sum.”

“Yes, but Marcus Lynn is a collector. He did not buy the weapons so that they could figure in the play.”

“What, exactly, is on your mind?”

“I do not like the way this youth’s death has followed so closely on the visit Conway and I paid to Mrs Wells’s shop.”

“You connect this boy’s death with that visit, do you? But the kid was a skinhead. Either one of his mates or a member of a rival gang bumped him off. These stabbing affairs are a feature of gang warfare. Mrs Wells said that her customer was a respectable boy with collar-length hair.”

“The head had been completely shaved. Is that a feature of gang warfare? I know that some of these youths have their hair very closely cropped, but could not this one have been assaulted and his head shaved before he was killed?”

“Oh, I think it’s only girls who get their heads shaved as a badge of shame. This chap probably wanted to emulate Kojak or Yul Brynner.”

“I thought that kind of hero-worship was confined to younger boys than this one. Besides, there were other things in the newspaper account which struck me as being significant. One was the description of the hands and feet of the dead boy.”

“I don’t see why that type of boy should not take care of his extremities. Some youths are very vain and go to all sorts of lengths to give themselves the means of making a good impression on the opposite sex. In any case, this lad had been rolled about in the ocean, I expect, for long enough to ensure that his whole body had had a scouring, don’t you think?”

“I accept your argument with becoming meekness, but with certain reservations. I share a bump of caution with Dr Jeanne-Marie Fitzroy-Delahague.”

“In what particular?”

“She, I have been told, was not content to treat Mr Rinkley’s collapse at the last night of the play as a simple bilious attack consequent on the injudicious

ingesting of mussels washed down by whisky. She sent him to hospital in case he had poisoned himself with something other than alcohol.”

“There is no chance that this lad poisoned himself, is there? The report says that he died of a stab-wound.”

“Which could have been administered as a *coup de grâce* if his killer decided to put him out of his agony if he was already dying from poison.”

“You really think he may have been poisoned? But Dr Jeanne-Marie was mistaken about the—what did she call it?—in Rinkley’s case.”

“Myelotoxin, but had I been consulted I should have insisted upon further tests if I had suspected any form of poisoning at all.”

“What sort of tests?”

“A combination of shellfish and whisky could have accounted for Rinkley’s illness, of course, but Dr Jeanne-Marie suspected poisoning. She thought of myelotoxin, but I should also have had the hospital make tests for arsenic.”

“Arsenic? Good Lord, why?”

“A non-lethal dose of arsenic added to the whisky could have produced the symptoms of which we have heard. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that Rinkley was deliberately removed from the scene in which a dagger was to be used. Whether he removed himself, or whether somebody else removed him, is not yet clear. Neither do we know whether Rinkley knew who was to be his understudy.”

“You could ask him that, I suppose.”

“I doubt whether I could place much confidence in his answer. It might be truthful or it might not. You see, if somebody had intended that Bourton should die in the way he did, it was essential that he should play Pyramus. That involved removing Rinkley from the scene. I do not say that arsenic *had* been put into the whisky he drank, but the symptoms, to my mind, were definitely suggestive, and when the tests for myelotoxin proved negative, tests for arsenic should have been made. I have no doubt that, if Rinkley had died, they *would* have been made.”

“But what makes you think of arsenic in the case of this dead boy?”

“The fact that his head was not closely cropped, but was completely shaved and that his hands and feet appear to have received painstaking attention. Arsenic persists for a very long time in the hair and nails.”

“You mean his murderer shaved his head and trimmed up his hands and feet before chucking him into the harbour?”

“Stranger things have happened. It would be interesting to know the truth of

the matter. None of it sounds like gang warfare to me.”

“You think this is the boy who bought the rapier, don’t you?”

“His death has followed strangely closely on my visit to Mrs Wells with Detective-Inspector Conway, that is all. As I say, had Mr Rinkley died, I have no doubt that the hospital would have carried out further tests, but he made a complete recovery, so no further action was taken. If somebody *had* given him arsenic—as I would have thought his symptoms suggested—the quantity was infinitesimal. The object must have been to render him *hors de combat* and the poison may even have been self-administered. We shall never get him to admit it, if such was the case.”

“It would be interesting, particularly to me, to find out whether the lethal dagger was really intended for Bourton, or whether Rinkley thought that *I* was to be his understudy.”

“I do not believe we shall know that, unless evidence is forthcoming which at present we do not possess. We may know more when the identity of this dead youth is disclosed. I wonder where the body was put into the water.”

“Goodness knows. I’ve done very little sailing since I came down here, although Simon introduced me to the secretary of the yacht club and told him that I might be using Simon’s boat. I was warned that these almost inland waters are tricky.”

“Because of the sandbanks?”

“Not those so much. The trouble is that in the bay storms are apt to blow up with great suddenness. I made up my mind there and then that I would never risk taking Rosamund and Edmund out in the boat. You can’t take chances with other people’s children. Deb and I had an example once of what the elements can do in these parts. It was really quite freakish. We set off in lovely sunny weather with the water looking like a lake, hardly a movement on the surface at all, so we put off from the yacht club’s little pier and sailed to Castle Island, that’s the largest of the three. Suddenly over those hills beyond the north shore of the island black clouds loomed and blotted out the sun, and the breeze which had been carrying us changed to half a gale. Then the water got up and did its best to swamp us. I was jolly glad to get back, I can tell you. I suppose the trouble is that there is only that one exit to the open sea from the bay; that’s where the ferry runs between those two points and it’s only about a quarter of a mile across.”

“Could the body have been put into the water more or less where it was found? Suppose it was put in at high tide, could not the ebb, in such shallow water, have left it stranded?”

“Possibly. The only thing is that I don’t believe anybody would have risked being seen dumping it. After all, a body is a pretty conspicuous object and, I would think, unmistakable for anything else. Have you been along there?”

“Yes. I realise what a busy road it is which connects with the ferry, but surely that is only while the ferry is working.”

“No, it’s pretty busy until after midnight. You will have noticed that, all the way along, the road is bordered by bungalows, houses and two big hotels. It’s very well-lighted and people who have been to entertainments in the nearby seaside resort come home at all hours. Anybody messing about on the foreshore would be spotted, even by the occupants of a fast car. My bet is that the body was chucked overboard from a boat off the south side of Castle Island for it to fetch up where it did.”

“You think the death-wound was struck while the youth was on board a yacht?”

“The police have examined all the local boats for bloodstains, of course, but there are visiting yachts in and out of the harbour all the time at this season of the year. Anyway, it’s likelier, I think, that death occurred on land and the boy was dead when he was taken aboard.”

“A risky proceeding, surely?”

“Murder *is* a risky proceeding. It must have happened on the island itself, I should think. People don’t land there as a general rule, but I can visualise a picnic party, a sudden flare-up, then panic as to what to do with the body. The murderer can’t have known much about these waters, or he would have realised what would happen. He must have thought that the ebb would carry the body across the track of the ferry and out into the open sea.”

“So where did the calculations go wrong?”

“The body ought to have been dumped off the opposite side of the island. Then it would have been caught up in the ebb current they call the Fishermen’s Race and that would have taken it right away into the Channel. I was yarning with the secretary of the yacht club and this was his idea. It was he who told me that the police had inspected all the boats for bloodstains. I’ve got a map upstairs. I’ll get it and show you what he means about the island.”

He went off to find the map. Left alone, for Deborah was in the kitchen talking to the cook, Dame Beatrice went to the window and gazed out at the vast expanse of shallow, innocent-looking water which formed the bay, and at its flotilla of small yachts and cruisers. When Jonathan returned with a map of the area, he spread it out on the newly-cleared breakfast table and said,

“The charts are on Simon’s yacht, but this will serve us. Nash, the secretary of the yacht club, has told me about the vagaries of these waters. From what he told me, I reckon that a body which was put into the sea here, on the north side of the island, would stand two chances. Either it would fetch up on the strand, as this body did, or it would get caught up at low tide on one of the sandbanks. On the other hand, if it was chucked in at full tide on the *other* side of the island, it would get pulled along by the Fishermen’s Race as soon as the tide turned, and be carried across the track of the ferry and, with any luck, out into the English Channel and possibly right across to the Isle of Wight.”

“I see what you mean,” said Dame Beatrice, “but wouldn’t all this be common knowledge?”

“Yes, of course all the local yachtsmen would know how the tides run. My idea is that the boy and his murderer are both strangers to the district, and Nash agrees with me.”

“And *my* idea is that no boat was involved, but that the murderer planted the body where it was found and that there is a connection between the dead boy and the rapier which was purchased from Mrs Wells. Everything has turned out much too pat for there to have been no such connection.”

“But I thought Mrs Wells said the rapier was purchased weeks ago.”

“Yes, but we did not go to visit Mrs Wells weeks ago.”

“You think the visit gave somebody a fright and he hurried up and killed the kid he had sent into the shop to buy the rapier for him?”

“It could well be so, except that I am surprised the boy was allowed to live so long. As you point out, Mrs Wells sold the rapier weeks ago. Her records were very clear, and there had been several sales noted down in her ledger since she sold the weapon in question.”

“Do you really think there is anything in your arsenic theory?”

“I think the analyst will take precautionary measures on the strength of the shaven head and the evidence of the extremely well-clipped finger and toenails, that is all.”

“Of course it’s easy enough to get hold of arsenic,” said Jonathan. “Rather stupid of murderers to use it, because, if poisoning is suspected, arsenic is just about the first thing people think of. You only need a tin of weedkiller or insecticide in the garden shed to become an immediate suspect. It used to be in flypapers and the paint on children’s toys, and it’s still in some colours and dyes and in wallpapers. Taxidermists use it and it’s put into sheep-dip—remember the case of that woman who got off because her brute of a husband had an open cut

on his hand when he was dipping sheep?—and there is arsenic in rat-poisons and ant-repellants, apart from its proper use in medicine.”

“Let us abandon the subject of arsenic and discuss another one.”

“I’ll get away from arsenic if you wish. To me it’s very strange you should have been so much impressed by the purchase of that rapier. So far, there is nothing whatever to connect the dead boy with our play. The fact that a boy mentioned amateur theatricals to Mrs Wells doesn’t really mean a thing. There are hundreds of amateur dramatic societies up and down the country. Are you sure you haven’t got a bee in your bonnet, aunt, dear?”

“Mrs Wells was inclined to think that the dagger Detective-Inspector Conway showed her at the police station had been cut down from the rapier she sold several weeks ago. The hilt had been slightly altered, it is true, but I think only a strong inclination towards caution made her unwilling to commit herself and declare that the dagger had been made from her rapier.”

“Would it help if the rest of the rapier was found? The lower part of the blade must be somewhere. Matter, they say, is indestructible, and I should think that steel is even more indestructible than most things.”

“The discovery of the rest of the blade would help, I daresay, if we could trace the possessor of it or, if it has been discarded, who threw it away. The next thing will be the inquest. I wonder whether it will disclose the identity of the dead boy? Until that is known, the police cannot get much further.”

“We’re doing our best, ma’am,” said Conway, when she put the point to him. “Nobody has come forward to say that a youth of about that age is missing. We’re treating this as a case of murder, but suicide can’t be ruled out, although I’d say he was a bit past the age when teenagers usually go in for it. We’ve rounded up the town gangs, but got nowhere, and we’ve tried remand homes and Borstals for anybody who has absconded and not been traced, but we haven’t turned up a thing. We shall have to get the inquest adjourned, although not for the same reason as the last one.”

“What was he wearing?”

“The usual casual outfit, jeans and a T-shirt, Y-front briefs, no socks, but what had been very expensive shoes until the sea-water ruined ’em. We are convinced he was murdered, though, because the left shoe was on the wrong foot and vice versa.”

“ ‘And madly crammed a right-hand foot into a left-hand shoe’,” quoted Dame Beatrice sadly. “Yes, indeed, that does appear to indicate murder. Was the stab-wound made through the clothing?”

“No, ma’am. The doctors say he was naked when he was stabbed, so it must be murder and somebody clothed the corpse but forgot to make the necessary holes in the clothing.”

Chapter 15

Identification of a Dead Boy

“What, out of hearing?—gone?—no sound, no word?”



The police had made a very thorough job of rounding up the local skinheads and these, for once, proved only too anxious to cooperate with what they regarded ordinarily as the enemy.

The leaders of the Side Kicks, the Diamonds and the Saints having been winkled out and taken to the police station to ‘help with enquiries’, it fell to the leader of the Saints to make a pertinent observation. He began by removing a T-shirt ornamented with a skull and crossbones and displaying a meagre torso which was also decorated after a fashion.

“Look,” he said, “we don’t own the guy without he’s got our mark on him.” He pointed to the tattooed design of a star inside a circle on his left breast. “Our members has to cross their hearts and swear on that,” he said, “so if he ain’t got the Lucky Star on his chest, he ain’t one of our members. See what I mean?”

It turned out that there were marks on the dead boy’s body, but they were small wounds, three in all, one on the left breast, one lower down on the ribs, the third on the abdomen near the navel. None resembled the initiation marks of the gangs. The Side Kicks had theirs in the form of a letter K on the right buttock, the Diamonds were branded on the back of the left hand with the emblem of that suit of cards, and subsequent checking of the gang members confirmed the asseverations of the three leaders. The dead youth did not figure among their initiates.

Dame Beatrice bided her time while all this was going on and then produced Mrs Wells once more. Shown a copy of the photograph which, after the failure of the inquisition on the street gangs, the police were proposing to exhibit, Mrs Wells shook her head.

“It could be,” she said. “There’s something about the mouth reminds me, but the boy I saw had hair and without the hair I couldn’t possibly say.”

“Almost to his collar, I think you told us,” said Dame Beatrice. She took out

a soft black pencil and gave the photograph a slightly ragged fringe on the forehead and a hairstyle of the required length. The result was gratifying.

“Ah, yes, that’s him,” said Mrs Wells. “I’m positive.”

“Doesn’t get us much further, ma’am,” said the inspector, “except that with the hair he looks rather different class from what he did without it. The bureau of missing persons doesn’t help, either. We’ve had two additions since we looked at it the other day, but one of them is a schoolgirl thought to have run off with her boyfriend and the other is an infant aged two believed to have been kidnapped from his mother by his father, who had already made two attempts to get him out of the country.”

The next tedious task which confronted the police was to find out, if they could, where the body had been put into the water. They thought it more than likely that the secretary of the yacht club was right and that the youth had been thrown overboard from a boat. On the other hand, as Dame Beatrice insisted, there were the other possibilities. It was true that the road to the ferry was a busy one by day and well-lighted by night, but it was also true that after the places of entertainment closed down and the pubs and hotel bars emptied, there was very little traffic either going or coming. Anybody who was prepared to take a chance could have brought the body in a car, pulled up on the rough grass which separated the road from the strand and carried the corpse far enough out to sea for the high tide to eliminate any footprints.

Matters were in this unsatisfactory state when a new problem presented itself. Emma Lynn came round to see Deborah. She brought news of two kinds, joyous for her on the one hand, worrying on the other. Deborah listened sympathetically to both stories, expressed delight at the first and then offered comfort and reassurance respecting the second.

“I wanted you to be the first to know after I’d told Marcus,” said Emma, at first glowing with pride and joy. “Oh, Deborah, after all this time to know I’m going to have a baby! Yes, it’s been checked and there’s no doubt about it and it’s all due to you.”

“Perhaps Marcus had something to do with it,” said Deborah, laughing and giving Emma a kiss.

“Well, we’ve tried hard enough, goodness knows! But, you know, I believe *The Dream* relaxed both of us and all the tension went out of us and Nature sort of rushed in, if you know what I mean. We hoped this would happen when we adopted Jasper seven years ago—well, nearly eight years ago. I had read true stories about childless couples who adopted and then found they could have one

of their own, another case of a relief from tension, I suppose. However, it didn't work for us, but what our adopting Jasper couldn't do, I'm sure the play has done. I was never so happy as when I realised I could play Helena, and Marcus, until that dreadful accident to Donald Bourton, was delighted with me and the costumes and your garden for the setting and everything."

"It's lovely news, Emma. Does Jasper know? What is he going to think about having a baby in the house?"

"He won't have much to do with it for the next four years because he will be at University. Anyway, Marcus has made up his mind that the baby, even if it's a boy, will make no difference to Jasper's prospects. Jasper has been brought up to be self-supporting, anyway. All Marcus's money will come to me. It's only proper that it should, he says, because he would never have got his start but for the money my father left me. All the same, Deborah, I'm rather worried about Jasper, although Marcus says it's very silly of me because boys are very thoughtless and forgetful and never bother to let you know what they're doing. Still, I can't help feeling worried and a little hurt."

"Why, what has happened?"

"Nothing, really, I suppose. That's what Marcus says. Only, you see, Jasper hasn't been in touch with us since he finished his A-levels and went on holiday with his friends while we flew to Italy for a little break after the play."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry, Emma. I've got two boys and they are exactly the same. I expect Jasper is enjoying himself and letting time pass. If he is anything like our two, you will probably find you get a solitary picture postcard after he arrives home. He is abroad, I suppose?"

"Yes. There are four of them. They were to cross to France and will be touring, so I can't get in touch with Jasper even if Marcus would let me, which he wouldn't. He says I'm just making a fuss about nothing."

"I'm sure he is right. Besides, if there is one thing more than another which young men resent, it's somebody worrying about their safety."

"Oh, I know, but I can't help it."

"Well, look, do you know the parents of the other boys?"

"Not really, but I've got the address and telephone number of one who came and stayed with us last year. Quite a nice boy, I thought."

"Why don't you ring his people up and ask if they've heard from their son, and whether they know how the boys are getting on?"

"I can't do that. Jasper would never forgive me."

"If I were worried about one of my boys I would chance that. Besides, ten to

one he would never know you had made the enquiry. Wouldn't it be worth it just to set your mind at rest?"

Nobody came forward to identify the body and the inquest on the dead youth was adjourned while further enquiries were made. Meanwhile Marcus and Emma Lynn received an unpleasant surprise. In response to his wife's entreaties Marcus, who at first had dismissed Emma's anxieties as 'hen with one chick stuff, my dear, so for goodness' sake snap out of it and leave the lad a bit of freedom from petticoat government', yielded at last and rang up the family of the youth who had been last year's guest at the Lynns' house.

His consternation was immense when in response to his call, the youth's mother informed him that her son certainly had gone on holiday and with two friends whom she named. Jasper Lynn was not one of them.

"Richard did invite him," she said, "and all the arrangements were made, we thought, but at the last minute Jasper ducked out on the excuse that he could not afford the trip."

At this Marcus could scarcely contain himself, but he retained sufficient self-control to thank her and apologise for troubling her.

"I do hope nothing's wrong," she said.

"No, no. Jasper did mention a possible change of plan, but we heard no more about it, so concluded that he had gone with Richard and the others after all," Marcus assured her.

To Emma he exploded, while she, poor soul, wrung her hands and wept.

"You said he ought to have his freedom," she sobbed, "and now he's taken it you're angry with him, but whatever can he be doing?"

"He's a deceitful, humbugging, double-crossing young hound!" shouted Marcus. "Lies, lies, lies! What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh! His father was rotten to the core, lord or no lord, and the boy takes after him. Well, he gets nothing more out of me!"

"He isn't responsible for his father, dear," said Emma, lifting her head and blowing hard into her handkerchief.

"To dare to tell those people he couldn't afford the trip! He was *loaded* with money! My only fear was that with so much on him he might be robbed. He could have had a fortnight at the best hotel in Paris on what I gave him. He's absconded with the lot, that's what he's done. I'm going to keep my eyes skinned, I can tell you! He'll be signing cheques in my name the next thing you know."

"Oh, Marcus, of course he won't! He is just having his little fling after all the

hard work he put in for his exams. I expect he has gone off with some girl. I just hope he doesn't get her into trouble, that's all. He is far too young to marry."

"Oh, it won't come to that," said Marcus, beginning to calm down. "If he's gone off with a girl, she can't be anybody respectable, or we should have heard by now. If he's made a fool of himself she can be bought off. I'll do that much, if it's necessary. It's the old Adam coming out, as I say, and this business puts the lid on it, but I'll see he doesn't ruin his life by marrying her."

"But we don't know yet that he *has* gone off with a girl. That was only an idea. You know how romantic he is, but I do think we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt until we know a bit more."

Meanwhile an upheaval of a different kind was going on not so very far away. Simon and Penelope Bradley came back from their round-the-world cruise, Rosamund and Edmund were reunited with their parents, Jonathan and Deborah returned to their Cotswold home and Dame Beatrice went back to the Stone House.

"Sorry you're leaving us," said the Chief Constable when she called to say goodbye. "Unfinished business, what!"

"I have no intention of leaving anything unfinished, but there is nothing I can do here which I cannot do equally well from my own home."

"Conway has given up hope of solving the mystery of Bourton's death. There is talk of re-opening the inquest and allowing the coroner to pronounce the verdict he was prepared to give at the beginning."

"Death by misadventure? But it was murder, carefully and deliberately planned. It was committed by one of the cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and fairly recently I have been inclined to add another name to my list of suspected persons."

"Oh? May I ask—?"

"Certainly. Before I leave this neighbourhood I should like to talk to Mr Tom Woolidge."

"Tom? Good Lord! Tom wouldn't murder anybody. He's a particularly decent chap and, incidentally, much too thick to have thought up this rather ingenious business of making a man commit suicide, which is the only other verdict the coroner can think up."

"Is Mr Woolidge too decent to make love to another man's wife?"

"You mean Barbara Bourton. Oh, I'm sure Bourton knew all about that and didn't give a damn. They went their own ways, you know, Barbara being on the stage and all that. Tom is a very personable chap and could get any woman he

wanted, but with Barbara he's more like a lolloping old faithful hound than a gay Lothario. I wouldn't waste any time over him if I were you. He's been pursuing Barbara for years. That's why he's never married. If Tom had been the murderous type he'd have had a go at Donald long ago, but he'd have shot him or something open and above-board like that. He's incapable of thinking out this hole-and-corner game of making the man murder himself."

"But so is everybody else I have interviewed. I was co-opted into this affair as a psychiatrist and I cannot see anybody yet who conforms to the necessary pattern. I need time to mull over my case-notes and find in them some vital clue. From what you tell me, an interview with Mr Woolidge would be a waste of that time and would not assist that thought. There remains this other death, that of the boy found on the foreshore."

"There's a tie-up somewhere, but we shall never find out what it is. Apparently he purchased a rapier which may have been cut down to make the dagger which killed Bourton. Somebody decided it was best to put him out of the way, and that somebody may well be Bourton's murderer. And now we've got something else on our plate. Lynn reports his adopted son as a missing person and wants us to trace him."

"Yes, Deborah told me of Emma Lynn's anxiety."

"It seems that, as soon as he had finished with school and while they themselves—the Lynns—were in Italy, the lad was to go on holiday and hasn't been seen or heard of since."

"And he was in the play," said Dame Beatrice thoughtfully, "and that means he was present when Mr Bourton stabbed himself, and that could mean—Look, it's a very long shot, but why don't you ask the Lynns for a photograph of their son—"

"Oh, we've got one."

"—and send somebody round to that antiques dealer with it?"

"A long shot indeed, my dear Beatrice. I'm quite sure that young Lynn is off on a toot. His father admits that he had given him ample funds for his holiday. He's cavorting on the Continent with some species of crumpet, you mark my words, and when he has got through the lolly he'll blow his cover, come back like the Prodigal Son, brave Marcus's wrath and Emma's tearful reproaches, and all will be gas and gaiters once more. I'm not in the least concerned about Jasper Lynn."

"I hope most sincerely that you are justified, but I still think it would be interesting to see whether Mrs Wells makes anything of young Lynn's

photograph. She was quick to recognise the police photograph of that dead youth who was found on the Ferry foreshore.”

“Only after you had added some hair to the head, I’m told. I don’t think I’d take her word for much. The lad was only in her shop once. It was a tall order to expect her to recognise what approximated to a death-mask, hair or no hair, don’t you think?”

“As you so rightly point out, there are difficulties.”

“Anyway, thanks for the tip. We can try Mrs Wells with the photograph and see how she reacts.”

Mrs Wells made no difficulty about the photograph. Unprompted, she exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s the boy who bought the rapier! I couldn’t be mistaken. There was that touch of class about him, if you know what I mean. When he said he wanted the rapier for theatricals, well, that was easy enough to believe. It was only the price he was willing to pay which made me wonder.”

“Would you be prepared to swear in court that this is a photograph of the lad who bought the rapier?” asked the inspector.

“Well, I don’t know about that. Still—yes, I *would* swear to him. Certainly I would.”

“So there it is,” said the Chief Constable to Dame Beatrice later, “and my chaps have now got the job of finding out why Jasper Lynn bought the rapier.”

“And for whom, if he did not buy it for himself,” said Dame Beatrice.

Chapter 16

Parade of Suspects

“Now, name the rest of the players.”



I’m glad to have you back,” said Laura. “You are very restful company after Rosamund and Edmund. Did the round-the-worlders enjoy their cruise?”

“Enormously. I am glad to be here again. The anecdotes and photographs, so precious to the travellers themselves, pall a little on a captive audience.”

“That is an extraordinary story about young Jasper Lynn. What are the police going to do about him?”

“Oh, there is to be what you would call ‘another comb-out’ of the yachting fraternity. The knowledgeable among the local boatmen seem to be convinced that the body was thrown into the bay from a yacht and so well-versed are they in the vagaries of their almost landlocked waters, vast in expanse though these are, that there is general agreement that the jettisoning took place off the uninhabited small bank called Castle Island. Experiments with non-human jetsam will prove the correctness of their view. Of that I have no doubt. The waters of the bay are idiosyncratic and their vagaries need to be known and allowed for, even in the calmest weather, I am told.”

“Yes, you can always go by what the locals have to say about winds and tides. Does it mean that you have taken yourself out of the enquiry into these two deaths? I should have thought it had reached the truly fascinating stage.”

“So it has, and I am still interested in it. There is nothing more that I can do on the spot. I need time for thought. Get the programmes with which we were supplied—and free of charge, at that!—when we attended the first performance of the play.”

Laura did this and scanned her own copy. Then she produced her shorthand pad and waited for instructions.

“I must say I prefer being a secretary to being a cross between a nanny and the Encyclopaedia Britannica,” she said.

“Nevertheless, much of what we know has been gained from Rosamund’s innocent disclosures. Let us take these people in order to programme and see what we know about them.”

The programme was arranged after the usual Shakespearian fashion of naming all the male characters first and finishing with the women.

“Theseus,” dictated Dame Beatrice, “director and producer. No known reason for disliking Rinkley, Bourton or Jonathan. Egeus, adopted son of Marcus Lynn. A schoolboy later found stabbed to death. Purchased rapier later converted into dagger with which Bourton inadvertently killed himself. May well have been the murderer and later committed suicide.”

“What!” exclaimed Laura, her pencil poised in disbelief. “That beardless boy?”

“In the play he was not beardless. Moreover, there appears to be some evidence that he was in love with Barbara Bourton and may have plotted to get her husband out of the way. On the other hand, we cannot be sure at present that the lethal dagger was not intended either for Rinkley or for Jonathan.”

“I think it could have been intended for Rinkley, you know. He doesn’t seem to be a very popular character and, what with the whisky and the indigestible mussels, he would have been entirely off his guard. Normally he would have spotted that he had been given the wrong dagger, but what with his fuddled state and the fact that he had come through the dress rehearsal and two performances quite unscathed, don’t you think he would have chanced things and so done himself in?”

“It is a valid argument and has been produced more than once.”

“On the other hand, Rinkley could have been the murderer. Even if whisky plus *mytilus edulis* had not made him throw up, it’s easy enough to manage it. I am reminded of another of Rosamund’s disclosures. You know what innocently disgusting beasts little boys can be. She told me that one of the Fitzroy-Delahague kids showed her how he could make himself sick by sticking two fingers down his gullet. I wonder whether Rinkley, having eaten the mussels, found them such uncomfortable customers in his inside that he removed them by the Delahague method. Contrariwise (and more likely) he still thought Jonathan would be the understudy and planned a very nasty revenge on him for that punch in the stomach.”

“There is much in what you say, and we must keep it in mind.”

“Well, I know you thought the intended victim was Bourton, but we’ve no evidence that Bourton and Rinkley had ever fallen out.”

“True, but you are going on the assumption that Rinkley himself changed over the daggers. That has not been proved.”

“He would have had the best opportunity.”

“Not so. There were others who had an equal opportunity. Robina Lester and her son, David, Caroline Frome and Susan Hythe, even Marcus Lynn with his scroll as Prologue, had every good reason for approaching the trestle tables and fiddling with the properties. The only thing is that unless all of them were in collusion (and that seems most unlikely, as Marcus Lynn was one of them) nobody could have changed over the daggers without being seen to do so, since all would have picked up their properties at about the same time.”

“What if the bold plotter, whoever it was, took advantage of the confusion caused by Rinkley’s collapse and changed over the daggers while the company was at sixes and sevens? I feel sure there is something in that. I suppose there must have been tumult and shouting, Dr Jeanne-Marie being called for, the audience warned of a stage wait, people tearing up to the house to telephone for an ambulance, Bourton being divested of that ornate Oberon outfit and getting into the Pyramus tunic and no doubt surrounded by a bodyguard of men to preserve the decencies, as there were ladies present. Anything could happen with a hoo-ha like that going on. How about that for an explanation?”

“It may be the right one. Let us keep it in mind.”

“If the dagger was intended for Bourton, it’s easy to see who benefits by his death, unless it was an act of revenge?”

“From what I hear, Mrs Bourton becomes a rich widow, yes, indeed. It seems that Donald Bourton left a considerable amount of money and all of it goes to her.”

“An *amende honorable* for all his philandering?”

“Maybe, or maybe he had nobody else he desired to benefit. Well, we still have two unknown quantities to deal with and, except for the fact that both were in the play and that they are brothers and bachelors, we have no information about them whatsoever.”

“You mean the Woolidges, Tom and Peter,” said Laura, referring to the programme. “Tom Woolidge played Lysander and Peter Woolidge was the most enterprising and athletic Puck I’ve ever seen. My heart warmed to that lad. Moreover, Rosamund has announced her intention of marrying him.”

“The older brother breeds bloodhounds.”

“Is that significant?”

“No.”

“Well, we’ve lined up a few of the characters. Now there is this business of Jasper Lynn. You do think he went off with a girl, don’t you?”

“It is difficult to imagine that he would have exchanged one set of male companions for another without telling his parents of his change of plan. The fact that they know nothing of where he went, or with whom, does suggest the need for secrecy on his part.”

“So what do we actually know about him? He was illegitimate and he was adopted. Beyond being given a good education and, I suppose, a start in life when he left University, what had he to expect from Marcus Lynn? We know he bought the rapier, we know somebody turned it into a dagger, and we know that dagger killed Bourton. Where is the tie-up? I can’t see one, unless—”

“Unless?”

“Unless the girl he went off with was either Caroline Frome or Susan Hythe. If one of them had got it in for Bourton, she might have talked a young hot-head of Jasper’s age into doing something very foolish and very wrong, and then dared not leave him alive to tell the tale later. Well, if we cut out Tom Woolidge—oh, we can’t, though. On Rosamund’s evidence he was inclined to sport with Amaryllis in the shade. In other words, he and Barbara Bourton met for what the innocent little snooper called ‘rehearsals’ in the woods.”

“Oh, yes, Mr Woolidge must remain on our list and so must Mrs Bourton. Jonathan comes next in the programme, but I think we may ignore him.”

“Also the nine-year-old Yolanda Yorke. That brings us to the workmen and you’ve more or less dealt with them privately, you told me, so we need not go over them again, need we?”

“There remain Helena, Hippolyta and Titania. Deborah is out of it for the same reason as Jonathan, and we may ignore, I feel, Mrs Yorke and also Mrs Lynn.”

“Brings us back to Barbara Bourton and really it does seem as though she had the strongest motive of all. To get rid of a faithless husband and come in for all his money must have been a great temptation to an ambitious woman.”

“Yes, you are right. The difficulty in her case, though, is the same as in all the other cases. When would she have had any opportunity to change over the daggers?”

“When all the clearing-up was done after the second performance, perhaps.”

“Marcus Lynn appears to have kept a jealous eye on the costumes and properties, but there may be something in what you say. I am still convinced that the daggers were changed over before the third performance began.”

“Well, we don’t seem to have cleared the decks, do we? I wonder what happened to the lower half of that rapier? The rest of the blade must be somewhere, as we said before. Suppose Jasper Lynn was stabbed with it by whoever sent him into the shop to buy the rapier? Is that a far-fetched idea?”

“Not in the least, and I have already considered the suggestion. However, I think Jasper bought the rapier on his own behalf, as the antiques dealer thought at the time. Still, if we could find the rest of the blade it might help.”

“I have a hunch that I know where it is. What’s wrong with having a look round Castle Island?”

“Nothing is wrong with it, if that will please you.”

“I think the locals are right and the body was dumped from a boat.”

“I suppose that is as likely as my own theory that it was taken by car to the spot where it was found.”

“Islands are always fun. Do let’s go. By the way, isn’t there a suspect we haven’t mentioned?”

“Is there? Of whom do we speak?”

“Didn’t you tell me there was an Indian chap who brought his little boy to be the changeling child?”

“I dismissed Narayan Rao from my calculations when I discovered that he left the scene long before Rinkley’s illness and Bourton’s death. It is true that he was in sight of the tables which held the properties, but I see no way in which he could have tampered with the daggers without being seen to do so. Moreover, he had seen neither of the previous performances and could not possibly have known which belt held the theatrical dagger, neither could he have provided a lethal weapon which resembled it, since he could not have known beforehand what it looked like.”

“I am greatly impressed by your metal detector,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to test one of these things. This island will be the very place.”

The boat which they had hired, ran gently into shallow water. Laura stepped over the side into a couple of feet of rippling, innocent little waves and held out her arms to Dame Beatrice and carried her ashore before the placid local boatman could offer his help. She returned to the boat for the metal detector. Her shoes were round her neck. She sat down on deep dry sand, unfastened the laces and put on the shoes.

Behind the dunes the land rose a little and soon they were among trees. In clearings they came upon two very shallow but fairly extensive ponds and

around these were traces of footpaths. Laura followed one of these, Dame Beatrice another. Their paths crossed and they met again after they had passed each other at the side of a small wood. They then found themselves in sight of the dunes and the mainland again.

“This,” said Dame Beatrice, “is opposite the road which runs between the Old Town and the ferry.” She led the way down the sandy slope to the shore. “Go to your left and I will go to the right.”

Laura demurred. The deep, soft, dry sand made very heavy going. She said:

“No point in both of us ploughing through this stuff. I’m going to make for that belt of trees. I’m all agog to try the metal detector up there. I shouldn’t think it could locate metal down here. I don’t really expect to find anything worth while, but I must say that this is rather fun.” She ploughed upwards. Dame Beatrice seated herself on the warm, dry sand and gazed at the opposite shore. A constant procession of cars was using the road over there, coming and going between the town and the ferry, and she realised, even more clearly than she had done before, the risks that would have been run by anybody planting a body on the strand at any time before about one o’clock in the morning, for not only was the traffic to and from the ferry very heavy, but the road passed through one of the most desirable residential districts of the place, and even though the ferry closed down each evening, the local cinemas, theatres and concert halls, as she had known previously, did not, so there would be cars along the road until after midnight. There were also the numerous houses, flats and bungalows which overlooked the bay. During the small hours, however, anybody prepared to take a chance might have driven on to the grass verge and tumbled a dead body down on to the mud, hoping, perhaps, that the receding tide would carry it away. Tyre marks, if any had been left, would count for nothing. On grass the treads would be indistinguishable from those of other cars which had used the verge as a parking place. There were two cars standing on the grass verge already and a third was pulling up alongside them.

She decided that there was no reason to change her mind. She still felt certain that the body had been dumped from a car, not thrown into the water from a boat. The police had not only made an exhaustive search of yachts and cruisers for bloodstains or other crucial evidence, she was also certain that the presence of boats lying off the island had been carefully checked. Even if one had gone out at night, she felt convinced that it would have been reported by somebody or other, by a fisherman, perhaps, or from the ever-watchful coastguard station.

She sat there for the better part of an hour until Laura came bounding and slithering down the slope towards her.

“Fun, but no dice, not so much as an old tin can,” Laura said. “All the same, I’m going to produce a fifty-pence coin to show the boatman. I’ve put some dirt on it. That ought to convince him I’m not as dotty as he thinks I am. I observed a sly Dorset smile when he eyed the metal detector.”

“You think of everything,” said Dame Beatrice.

“I only wish I could think where the lower half of that weapon is.”

Chapter 17

Mute and Other Witnesses

“Nothing impaired, but all disordered.”



Yes,” said the Chief Constable, taking his cigar out of his mouth and studying the length of ash on it. “We’ve had what you might call fun and games after Mrs Wells clinched the identification of the lad who bought the rapier.”

“With poor Mr Lynn, I suppose,” said Dame Beatrice, “you had what you call the fun and games.”

“Yes, with Mr Lynn. Nothing would satisfy him but an exhumation. He demanded to be allowed to examine the corpse we found dumped on the shore opposite Castle Island. We applied for permission and got it. I don’t know what his idea was. Seems ghoulish to me to dig people up once they’re decently buried. It wasn’t as though any further identification was necessary. Mrs Wells’ evidence was quite clear.”

“Perhaps Mr Lynn was not satisfied that his adopted son *had* been decently buried.”

“That was part of his argument. The lad had been buried in a common grave as, at the time, nobody knew who he was, but once you’re dead and in a coffin, what does the rest of it matter?”

“It would matter to me,” said Laura, “if the deceased was any child of mine.”

“Oh, well, anyway, we got official permission and a fine old how-de-do it all was. The decree went forth, as from Augustus Caesar, that the job was to be done in the small hours of the morning to avoid publicity and forestall morbid sightseers. What a hope! Avoid publicity? My God!”

“Yes, I have read Professor Keith Simpson on the subject of exhumations, particularly that of one of the Rillington Place victims,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Yes, I’ve read it, too. Well, our experience was much the same as his. First of all there was the need to screen off the grave which had been opened. That was done the day before, so any attempt at secrecy was doomed from the

moment the hoarding went up. We had to do this the day before, so as to save time on the actual day, but we might as well have put up a notice to say that an exhumation had been arranged and would shortly take place.”

“All the same, I suppose there was some point in getting confirmation of identity,” said Laura.

“Well, perhaps, but what Lynn wanted was a slap-up funeral for his boy. I’m certain he had no more doubts about identification than the rest of us had. Anyway, we drafted in twenty uniformed coppers to keep a guard on the cemetery, put up barriers closing the place to the public and the press, and at the witching-hour of half-past five a.m. all those legitimately concerned surrounded the heap of gravel, clay and so forth which had been dug out on the previous evening and waited for the lifting of the coffin.”

“It sounds like something out of Edgar Allan Poe,” said Laura. “I should have expected something besides the coffin to pop up. I think exhumations are horrible.”

“Of course we didn’t allow Lynn himself to be present. He had to wait until we got the body to the mortuary, and there was really no need for me to be there, either, but I thought he would expect it, my being a friend of the family, so to speak, and being on dining terms with them and what not, so I showed up. The other people there besides the Super and Conway, were the pathologist, another doctor (in case any of us was overcome by the bizarre nature of the proceedings, I suppose), the grave-digger, the mortuary superintendent and the undertaker.”

“The last three to certify that the right coffin was being lifted, I suppose,” said Laura.

“It was the top one of five, but, even so, it had been buried five feet down. Well, of course you can’t patrol a place the size of that cemetery with only twenty policemen, so we couldn’t keep the newshounds at bay, especially their long-range cameras. Anyway, they didn’t dare come too close, although some of them must have seen the coffin come up out of the ground. Well, the box was cleaned up, the metal plate identified and then off we went to the mortuary. Apart from the reporters and camera crews, it was surprising what a number of citizens were on their way to work so early in the morning. I should think there were a couple of dozen of them outside the gates.”

“It’s the same mentality as that which will collect round a hole in the road,” said Laura. “Why they do it, goodness only knows.”

“Well, the grisliest part of the business was yet to come. I won’t describe it. A body which has been dead for any length of time is not a thing of dignity or

beauty. However, Lynn said he was satisfied and had already arranged for what he called ‘a proper burial’, so the only thing left, so far as the official records were concerned, was to resume the inquest, confirm the identity of the corpse as being that of Jasper Lynn and get the coroner’s verdict of murder by person or persons unknown. Conway is still working on the identity of the murderer, but with no expectation of success. He says it must have been ‘one of those dark alley jobs’. His only hope is to find out where Jasper went, and with whom, during the time he was supposed to be touring on the Continent with his friends.”

“That means finding the lady,” said Laura, looking at Dame Beatrice for confirmation of this obvious view. “It shouldn’t be all that difficult, surely? As the son of a wealthy and prominent man, Jasper must have been very well known in the town.”

“Mrs Wells could not identify him until some hair had been added to his head,” said Dame Beatrice. “Baldness, it seems, can be as effective a disguise as a beard.”

“Of course he wore a beard in the play,” said Laura. This sidetrack remark was ignored by both her hearers. “Besides, there’s the weapon,” she went on, somewhat defiantly. “That must be somewhere. Could he have been stabbed with the lower part of that rapier?”

“If the shaven head was intended as a disguise,” said Dame Beatrice, “the answer to our problems may be nearer to us than we think. As for the weapon, where better to hide an object, as wiser tongues than mine have pointed out, than in a collection of similar objects?”

“Mr Lynn’s collection of swords and daggers!” said Laura.

“Mrs Wells may be able to help us there,” said Dame Beatrice.

“But Lynn didn’t murder his son!” protested the Chief Constable. “He was in Italy when the boy died!”

Lynn’s collection of weapons occupied two rooms on the second floor. One housed the firearms, the other what the Chief Constable referred to as ‘the cutlery’.

“I don’t want to be longer than I can help, “ said Mrs Wells, the expert. “You don’t tell me what I’ve got to look for?”

“One mustn’t prompt the witness, Mrs Wells,” said Dame Beatrice. “What do you think of the collection?”

“There’s some good stuff here.” The exhibits were mostly in glass cases and were neatly laid out and meticulously labelled. Only such items as lances,

halberds, pikes, bills, boar-spears and partizans were outside the cases, although they were firmly attached to the walls.

Mrs Wells paid them no attention. She went methodically from case to case, but gave no sign of having made any discovery. At the end she shook her head.

“It isn’t here,” she said.

“What isn’t?” asked Lynn, who had admitted the visitors and was showing them round.

“That dagger. I’ve studied all the hilts.”

“That dagger is still in the hands of the police,” said Dame Beatrice.

“Well, there’s nothing here I recognise except a part of a blade, and I only noticed that because the hilt is new and the item isn’t labelled like the rest are. I’m surprised you included it in a collection of this value,” she added, turning to Lynn.

“Would you point out the blade?” said Conway.

Mrs Wells went to the third of the glass cases she had examined and pointed to a slim dagger which had a simple hilt made of walnut and a single ring on the metal quillon-block. The blade was about fifteen inches long, some of it having been inserted in the hilt. The inspector put a handkerchief over his hand, picked up the dagger and closed the case, laying the dagger on top of it. Lynn said indifferently, “Oh, that thing! It’s the dagger Jasper had made for himself to wear in the play. I don’t know what it’s doing here. It’s worthless.”

“Would you turn it over, please? Ah, that’s it!” said Mrs Wells. “Well, I never! Yet I suppose it’s natural enough, when you come to think.”

“Then pray share your thoughts with us, Mrs Wells,” said Dame Beatrice. “You recognise this dagger. That is obvious.”

“Not the hilt I don’t. That’s why I passed it over the first time. There’s no doubt about the blade, though. Here, take my glass and look for yourselves. Can you make out the lettering on the blade? The beginning of the words has been cut off, but there’s enough left for you to see.”

The Chief Constable took the watchmaker’s glass she produced and studied the blade. He then read aloud “chior etter” and, removing the glass, which he handed back, he added, “Obviously the letters mean more to you than they do to me, Mrs Wells.”

“Well, they’re a modern forgery, of course, like the blade itself,” she said, “but they stand for Melchior Diefstetter of Munich. He was a famous German swordsmith of the middle of the sixteenth century. This is the lower end of the blade of that rapier I sold that poor boy. Goodness knows why he had it cut

down. Mind you, although this is much later than Diefstetter's time, and the hilt is almost new, like I said, it's a nice bit of work had it been genuine."

"Genuine?" snorted Lynn. "Of course it's not genuine, although it could deceive some people, I suppose."

"If it had been genuine," Mrs Wells went on, "it would have been a real collector's piece and I certainly would not have let it go to that boy for what he gave me."

"How did it come into your possession, Mrs Wells?" asked Dame Beatrice, motioning Lynn to remain silent.

"Oh, in the usual way, through the trade. There was an auction and one or two items interested me. The whole lot had been in the armoury of a big house in the Midlands. I got"—she looked hopefully at Marcus Lynn—"a genuine haute-piece and a fifteenth-century German sallet, but when it came to the rapier, well, everybody knew it was a dud and there were no bids, so, in the end, I got it thrown in with quite a nice German gothic mace, late fifteenth century, for which I knew I'd got a customer."

"Do you know an antiques dealer named Rinkley, Mr Rinkley's divorced wife, who has a shop in this town?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, most of us know each other in the trade, but she wasn't at this particular sale. Her specialities are china and glass, so there was nothing to interest her. Living not so far apart, and our professional lives never crossing, as you might say, if I hear of anything in her line I let her know and she does the same by me. That's really as much as I know about her."

"What is a haute-piece?" asked the Chief Constable.

("Shades of Rosamund!" murmured Laura to Dame Beatrice.)

"Oh, it's a guard for the neck. It was placed on the pauldrons."

"And those?"

"They are the thick metal plates which protected the shoulders."

"And a sallet?"

"That is—if you'll excuse the description—a po-shaped helmet, sixteenth century, with just a slit for the eyes. It's a bit longer at the back than the front to ward off a slash on the back of your neck. I believe the foot-soldiers used to wear them against attacks by cavalry."

"Thank you. Well," the Chief Constable went on, "it seems it must have been Jasper himself who placed this dagger amongst his father's collection."

"Like hell he did!" exclaimed Lynn indignantly. "Of all the damned impudence! I wouldn't have that pseudo object among my collection if Jasper

had gone on his bended knees to me. Still, I mustn't curse the lad now."

"Where did you see it last, Mr Lynn?" asked Conway.

"Hanging from a hook on the lad's bedroom wall with a damned silly notice pinned up underneath it to the effect that She—whoever *She* is—buckled it on for him at the last performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There followed the last date of the play and then there was this foolery that he was going to become a Buddhist monk."

"Interesting," said Dame Beatrice. "He shaved his head to try out how he would look, I suppose. It suggests doubt."

"Well, what's our next move?" asked Laura, when they were alone again.

"We must find the person who cut up the rapier and turned it into two daggers. The police are already looking for him."

"Nobody is going to admit to having done it. After all, two murders have been committed with the beastly things."

"Or two suicides; or one murder and one suicide. In neither case has murder been proved. As to the person who converted the rapier into the daggers, we now have a little more to go on. Ring up Mr Lynn and ask him whether he employs an expert to examine his collection of weapons from time to time and keep it in good order. I think there must be someone of that sort in the background."

Lynn's expert was employed by a museum whose collection of weapons, although significantly smaller than that at the Tower of London, for example, was worthy enough to be listed in a catalogue of notable collections. The expert the museum employed also did some private work of the same kind. He was responsible to the museum for the maintenance and repair of the weapons and was skilled at replacing worn or missing parts, not with any intention to deceive, but merely to preserve valuable metal objects so that they could be exhibited for the benefit of students, researchers, historians and other interested parties.

Conway, sceptical, but exhibiting both daggers, asked whether the expert could identify them.

"Oh, yes, certainly I can," the expert replied at once. "I was shown a rapier, a fairly modern forgery of a weapon purporting to be by the German master Melchior Diefstetter of Munich. It was brought by young Jasper Lynn and I told him it wasn't genuine. He said he only wanted a couple of daggers made for some theatricals and asked whether I could fashion them from the rapier. I do my own smithing, you see. Well, I've done a lot of work for his father, including advising him and accompanying him to antiques shops and sales, and I do any small repairs and see to the cleaning and maintenance of what is one of the finest

private collections in this country. I was happy to oblige the boy, especially as it was nothing valuable that he wanted cut up.”

“How long ago was this?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“Oh, a good many weeks now. Back at the beginning or middle of June, near enough. But may I ask what this is all about?”

“All in good time, if you don’t mind, sir,” said Conway. “You will have gathered that we should not have approached you on a matter of minor importance. If it becomes necessary, would you be willing to swear in court that the two daggers I have just shown you were made from the same rapier?”

“Swear to that? Well, of course I would. The thing one doesn’t mistake is one’s own handiwork, and I take pride in mine.”

“Well,” said Dame Beatrice to Laura, who had not accompanied her to the museum, “I feel certain that there is a connection between the two daggers and the change of understudies for the part of Pyramus.”

“But only the married couples at the cocktail party were told about that.”

“One of the married couples had an adopted son and his name was Jasper Lynn.”

“But Jasper Lynn wasn’t with them at the cocktail party, was he? I thought he was supposed to be swotting for his exams.”

“Connect us with Jonathan over the telephone. Deborah will remember who was present, if he does not. As his father’s son, I think Jasper had an opportunity of handling the properties before the opening of the play, including the third night. Were we not told that he helped to carry them down from the house?”

“I seem to remember hearing that he helped his father and Brian Yorke to carry the ‘props’ down to the trestle tables, yes, but what would he have had against either Rinkley or Bourton, let alone Jonathan?”

Dame Beatrice did not answer. Laura went out to the telephone and then made her report.

“Jasper was not at the cocktail party,” she said, “but Jon says he remembers him helping to carry down the props. The players were issued with their costumes and Jon, Tom Woolidge, Brian Yorke and Donald Bourton got their swords and daggers with their costumes, but young Yolanda and Jasper had theirs put on the table, because they were only supposed to wear daggers in the hunting-scene. Jasper, however, defied the producer on the last night and wore his dagger all the time. Jon says he noticed it because, of course, they were in the first scene together, but Yorke and Lynn didn’t make any fuss as it was the last night. I can’t see that all this matters, anyway.”

“I have said all along that the lethal dagger was put into the belt intended for Pyramus before the play opened on the third night. Jasper was in possession of the two daggers made from the rapier.”

“I see what you mean. Jasper could have done it, but—a schoolboy! It seems most unlikely. Why would he want to kill anybody?”

“I quote Marcus Lynn, who had read (with irritation, one gathers) a notice which Jasper had pinned up in his bedroom. He said, ‘She—whoever *She* was—buckled it on for him at the last performance.’ Symbolism here shows a shining morning face, does it not?”

“Symbolism? I don’t follow.”

“A knight of old liked to have his sword buckled on by his lady and, as I am not a gentleman, I may be excused for bandying this particular lady’s name. I think we need look no further than Barbara Bourton.”

“But, good Lord, she’s nearly old enough to be his mother!”

“I seem to remember a play called *Young Woodley*,” said Dame Beatrice. “Besides, as a very charming woman once said to me when we were discussing the subject of demonstrative love: ‘I don’t think age has anything to do with it’.”

“But even if you think Jasper doped Rinkley’s whisky, and even if he had heard from his parents that Bourton was to be the understudy, how did he think getting rid of Bourton would help him? He *can’t* have thought Barbara would ever marry him!”

“No, he did not imagine for a moment that Barbara would.”

“Then what *did* he think?”

“That by getting rid of Bourton he would not only free Barbara so that she could marry Tom Woolidge, but he could also ensure that she would be a wealthy woman. I see him as an unhappy, idealistic youth. The urge to become a Buddhist monk is typical. So were his doubts about his appearance.”

“No, honestly, I can’t swallow all this. If what you say is true, who killed Jasper!—and why?”

“Barbara Bourton may be able to tell us. If she will not do so, I shall be compelled, in order to clear up the case, to tell *her*. I shall see her alone.”

Chapter 18

Threnody

“And as he errs, doting on Hermia’s eyes.”



How much do you know?” asked Barbara Bourton.
“That is a stock question,” replied Dame Beatrice, “and I will give the appropriate answer. I know all that I need to know. For one thing, I know that Jasper Lynin did not put the fatal dagger among his father’s collection of weapons.”

“You make it sound like an Elizabethan tragedy and I suppose that is what it was.”

“Will you tell me the plot, or shall I tell it to you?”

“Oh, just as you please. I pay you the compliment of believing that by this time you know it all. If you did not, you would hardly have singled me out. There is one thing, though, which I should like to know.”

“Why the anonymous letters suddenly stopped?”

“I see that you are a thought-reader. No wonder you are so successful in your profession.”

“My profession helps, no doubt. The letters stopped because it was fairly obvious who was writing them. I sent her a warning, that is all, and she was sensible enough to accept it.”

“Is it of any use to ask—?”

“I shall name no names. There were two possible candidates, both unattractive, both, at the beginning of rehearsals, unhappy, but, before the letters were written, one had recovered her spirits, the other, I am sure, had not. You may or may not know that Mr Rinkley, as well as yourself and the two young girls, came to me for comfort and advice.”

“Rinkley? Had he received one of the letters?”

“More than one, he gave me to understand.”

“Oh, well, there is only one unattractive woman—you did say she was unattractive, didn’t you—who would have written nasty letters to Rinkley, and

that woman was not Emma Lynn.”

“Shall we leave it at that?”

“What did the letters accuse him of?—not paying his gambling debts to my husband? He should have ignored the letters. You can’t be had up for so-called debts of honour, and, whatever his faults, Donald didn’t employ strong-arm men to frighten or bash people into paying up. A properly conducted turf accountant’s business doesn’t need to go in for that sort of thing. It covers itself as it goes along. So, if the letters were not about gambling, they must have had to do with the play and that means Robina Lester.”

“When did you first realise that young Jasper Lynn was in love with you?” asked Dame Beatrice abruptly.

“Or thought he was. They get over it very quickly and easily, you know, although it can be a nuisance and a responsibility while it lasts—or so I’ve always discovered.”

“But Jasper got over it neither quickly nor easily, did he?”

“You can’t blame me for that. I’m sure I gave him no encouragement.”

“I seldom apportion blame. Let me hear the evidence for the defence. A woman of your experience could have put a stop to the affair as soon as you realised what was happening. Why did you not do so?”

“Oh, *please!* It never developed into an affair! It wasn’t until the very end that I knew what he was feeling, and then it was too late to do anything.”

“But at the rehearsals—?”

“Oh, those rehearsals! Really, Dame Beatrice, you have no idea how unutterably tedious and boring they were. And to have to use one’s voice all the time in the open air and in the evenings at that, with all the mist coming up from the bay and some idiotic bird trilling away in the trees! If it hadn’t been for Tom, I would have thrown up the part. I only took it on because the play gave us a chance to be alone together occasionally in those woods.”

“Ah, yes. ‘Under the greenwood tree, who loves to lie with me, and tune his merry note unto the sweet bird’s throat.’ ”

“Good gracious, Tom isn’t a gamekeeper, even if he does breed dogs! Neither am I Lady Chatterley. There was nothing improper in our encounters, I assure you. There were far too many people round and about, for one thing, for us to take any risks.”

“There was certainly one small and very inquisitive person to bear witness to the proceedings, so your circumspection was justified and I apologise for my *lapsus linguae*. I intended no odious comparisons. May we return to the matter

in hand? It is serious enough, in all conscience. You must surely have been aware, very early on, that Jasper Lynn was infatuated with you. Boys of his age are adept at hiding some of their feelings, but the blind adoration of a beloved object is not among these.”

Barbara was silent for a full minute; then she said, “I don’t suppose you know this, but in the read-through of the play I was cast as Helena, not Hermia, and so I did not appear in the first scene until nobody was left on-stage except Emma and Tom. I knew that a gangling adolescent had been chosen as Egeus and my only concern was that he was hardly likely to be convincing in the part. As to his being billed as Emma’s father, well, I was thankful that they were only to play the opening scene together and that I didn’t have to appear with him, but when Emma turned down the part of Hermia and it was wished on me, the ludicrous aspect struck me all over again. It became embarrassing, though, when Brian Yorke, never the soul of tact, pulled the boy up in mid-speech in one of the early rehearsals.

“ ‘Look, Jasper, darling boy,’ he said, ‘you are suggesting that Barbara must either be put to death or become a nun if she doesn’t carry out your wishes. I realise that, left to your natural inclinations, you would not want either of these things to happen, but you are playing a part, not indulging in a visit to the Hesperides. Do pay attention to what is going on. Back to “With cunning hast thou filched my daughter’s heart”, and look daggers at Tom when you say it and then look at Barbara as though you’d like to give her a thrashing. All right, then. Now, please, everybody, put some pep in it. This scene sets the whole play moving.’ It was only then that I realised the boy had been making sheep’s eyes at me.”

“I can guess the next bit,” said Dame Beatrice. “The boy came to you at the end of the rehearsal and abased himself for making you conspicuous. You, I suppose, feeling sorry for him, gave him a kiss and obtained a response which, as a beautiful and experienced woman, you ought to have foreseen and allowed for.”

“I was never more astonished in my life. To me he was just an abashed and awkward schoolboy and suddenly to find myself locked in his arms and having to listen to the kind of stuff that would have made Antony and Cleopatra turn in their graves with embarrassment—well, it was not only ludicrous; it was quite alarming.”

The story unfolded. Dame Beatrice listened and decided to keep any questions unasked, if possible, until the narrative came to an end. Jasper had

written a letter couched in the humblest and most contrite terms begging forgiveness 'for my unpardonable conduct', promising that he would 'never again precipitate such a situation', but offering 'eternal homage and beseeching you to grant me the benison of your friendship'.

"After that," continued Barbara, "I must say that, apart from adoring glances from him in the first scene, nothing happened because he was revising for his examinations, so, as he had no more speeches, he did not stay for the last scenes but went straight home to study. There was no fear, I mean, of his following Tom and me into the woods, or anything of that sort." Barbara went on to say that the rehearsals continued as smoothly as could be expected considering that Rinkley of the unkind tongue and Donald Bourton of the amorous inclinations were in the cast. Then Deborah and Jonathan gave their cocktail party to which only the married couples were invited. This occurred some weeks before the dress rehearsal and was followed, at the next rehearsal, by a statement from Jasper which, at the time, scarcely registered with Barbara. Helping her off with her coat and laying it reverently on one of the trestle tables which, later, would be used for the props, he asked her how she would like it if he could make her a rich woman.

" 'I have the means, you know,' he told me," said Barbara. " 'You mean your father is a wealthy man? But it will be a long time, I hope, before you inherit anything from him and, when you do, you will think twice before giving any of it away,' I said, laughing. 'Oh, but,' he said, 'I'm not talking about my father's money. I have no expectations there. Everything will go to Emma. That's the usual arrangement between husbands and wives, isn't it? It's not as though I'm his son, you see.' Well, this meant nothing to me at the time, Dame Beatrice. All I said was that I believed the wife was entitled to claim something when the husband died, and that, in my case, I knew that I was well provided for. 'Anyway, I am more than likely to die before Donald does,' I remember saying. He asked me what I would do if I had a lot of money. 'Oh, I should form my own company and pick the parts I wanted for myself instead of having to wait for offers and then perhaps get saddled with something unsuitable,' I told him, 'and have to do the best I could with it.' "

"And now you are in a position to realise all your ambitions," said Dame Beatrice.

"Well, yes, but if I had ever dreamed of how it would come about..."

"Quite; however, one cannot foresee some things."

"Nobody could have foreseen that Rinkley would be taken ill at the last

performance.”

“Oh, I am sure young Jasper had made sure of that. I suspect there had been something added to the drinks Mr Rinkley took back-stage.”

“Some of the men overdid it and not only Rinkley. Sometimes I think that if only Donald hadn’t been so drunk he might have realised, the minute he took it out of his belt, that he’d been given the wrong dagger. We all thought it must have been meant for Rinkley, though, if it wasn’t just somebody’s carelessness. Rinkley wasn’t popular, you know, and he would have known, as Donald should have, that he had the wrong dagger and no harm would have been done.”

“That point was made long ago and disposed of. The substitution of the lethal dagger for the harmless one can only have been made by one of the three persons who carried the properties from the house to the stage. Of these, Brian Yorke would have had no reason to harm any of his actors; the same applies to Marcus Lynn, who had subsidised the production and certainly would not want it disrupted. That leaves young Jasper, who, like a dutiful son, helped to carry down the properties each evening after the costumes had been distributed to the performers. Well, I think we may approach the end of this very unhappy story, don’t you?”

“Before we do, there is something I have to ask you. I see you know it all, and no doubt you have all the evidence you need. What will happen to Tom and Peter and me? The police are still looking for a murderer.”

“I am afraid you will have to tell them your story, but the verdict, now that the identity of the young boy’s body is not in doubt, will be suicide while the mind was disturbed. Where that suicide actually took place is beside the point, in a way, but it was a mistake, perhaps, on the part of one of you, to add the suicide weapon to Mr Lynn’s collection. However, he seems convinced that Jasper himself placed it there and that he killed himself with some other form of cold steel.”

“Yes the police have thought all along that it was murder. I’ve been living in a state of terror. I would have gone to them except for implicating Tom and Peter. Why have you decided it was suicide?”

“The pathologist found three small puncture marks on the front of the body and suggested that suicide was at least as likely as murder. Suicides are on record as being hesitant and experimental before they pluck up the courage to deal themselves *le coup de grâce*. Mr Lynn’s reference to his son’s written intention to become a Buddhist monk has been taken as evidence of unsound mind. That seems to have clinched the matter.”

“So what happens now?”

“Nothing, except that you are going to tell me the rest of the story. The suicide, I suppose, took place here in your house.”

The rest of the story was soon told. After his parents had gone to Italy and he himself was supposed to have joined his friends for the touring holiday in France, Jasper had turned up at the Bourtons’ house to find Barbara still clearing up in preparation for putting the property up for sale and moving to London.

“I didn’t recognise him until he spoke,” she said. “There was this completely bald object dressed in T-shirt and jeans and carrying what looked like a cricket bag and I was alone in the house because it was past half-past eight in the evening and my maid had given me my dinner at seven, washed up and gone home. She was the only one of Donald’s household that I had kept on. Well, I thought at first that the boy might have found out that the house was empty, except for me, and was up to no good, and I was about to slam the door on him when he spoke.

“ ‘It’s Jasper,’ he said. ‘I say, the hot water at our place has conked. Could you let me have a bath?’

“He sounded perfectly normal and sensible, so, of course, I let him in and asked what he had done with his hair. He said he had decided to turn Buddhist and go to a monastery in Tibet.

“ ‘I thought you were going to France,’ I said. ‘Oh, you can have a bath, of course. First floor, at the top of the stairs. What about towels?’

“He pointed to the bag and said he had brought towels. Then he said, ‘Barbara, will you kiss me goodbye? I promise not to take any advantage’.

“I said, ‘You’re not really thinking of going to Tibet, are you?’

“He said he had considered it, but he did not think the Buddhists would accept him. ‘They don’t believe in killing things,’ he said. Even then, Dame Beatrice, it didn’t dawn on me what he meant.”

“That he had changed over the daggers so that your husband killed himself? Did you never think of Jasper in that connection? Did his hints of making you rich and independent convey nothing to you?”

“I solemnly swear to you that nothing of the sort ever crossed my mind. Oh, I knew the poor boy was going through a bad time about me. It had happened before. I recognised all the symptoms.”

“ ‘Thou, thou (young Jasper) thou has given her rhymes. And interchang’d love-tokens with my child. Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung, With feigning voice, verses of feigning love,’ ” said Dame Beatrice. “That kind of

thing, I suppose.”

“There wasn’t much feigning about it, but I thought it would soon die a natural death.”

“Instead of which, the poor youth died a most unnatural one. Well, he said he had towels. I suppose he had the dagger in his bag, not towels. What then?”

“Upstairs he went and I went on sorting out Donald’s papers, which is what I’d been doing when Jasper came, and I forgot all about him until I got tired of the job and decided it was time for my bedtime drink and my bed. It was then I remembered Jasper and realised that he had not looked in to say goodnight. I thought he had decided not to disturb me again and had slipped off home.

“ ‘And a fine old mess I expect the bathroom is in,’ I thought, knowing what men, and particularly young ones, are like. I went upstairs, found the bathroom door shut and, under the crack of the door, I saw that the light was still on.

“I called out, ‘Jasper, are you all right?’ There was no answer, so I called out again and then I tried the door. It was not locked, so I opened it a little way and took a look.

“Well, Dame Beatrice, I didn’t faint, although everything swam round me for a minute. Then I ran downstairs to the telephone and rang up Tom. ‘I’ve got Jasper Lynn here and he’s killed himself, and the bath is full of blood,’ I said.

“Well, Tom was wonderful. He brought Peter with him and when he had been upstairs, leaving Peter downstairs with me, he said, ‘We can’t have you implicated in this. Don’t worry. I know what to do. This has got to look like a skinhead gang business. Lucky he had shaved his head. We’ll have to give it an hour or two until the coast is clear. I’ve let the water out and I’ll clean the bath and get rid of the dagger. He will have a key in his jeans pocket, so Peter will slip along to Lynn’s place and put the dagger among Lynn’s swords and things, and then we’ll all have a good strong snifter before we take the poor kid down to the harbour.’ ”

Rosamund, proud of her achievements in reading, had picked up her father’s discarded newspaper and was perusing it slowly and with diligence.

“What’s un-bal-anced mind?” she asked. Simon answered,

“It’s a state of mental instability brought about by emotional stress which has upset the anti-depressant factors in *mens sana*, thus over-weighting the normal equilibrium of the *cerebellum* and culminating in *felo de se*.”

Rosamund looked reproachfully at him and said: “When I ask Mrs Gavin to tell me things, she tells me things properly. Why don’t *you* tell me things properly, Daddy, when I ask you?”

“Because I’m a horrible man, I suppose.”

Edmund turned to his mother.

“Daddy’s a horrible man. He drinks all the beer,” he said.

—<>—<>—<>—

[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A 3S Release— v1, html]

[April 20, 2007]